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BY MARIE-CÉCILE CERVELLON AND PAMELA LIRIO



THE LEADING QUESTION

How can you get employees to actively support your brand on social media?

FINDINGS

- Recognize and value employee brand ambassadors on social media.
- Encourage younger employees to share their social media skills with more senior employees.
- Train employees on the do's and don'ts and the importance of having a social media presence.

MORE THAN 2 BILLION people worldwide are users of social media, making it a logical platform for companies seeking to attract potential employees and engage consumers with their brands. In addition to sharing information on brand activities through official social media pages or accounts, organizations also are represented on social media through the private social media activity of employees. In their private lives, employees play multiple roles. They are free to share brand-related information, make comments endorsing the organization's brand, and display behaviors that are consistent (or at odds) with the brand values and promise. For companies, the social media behavior of employees represents both an opportunity and a risk.

When employees talk privately about their brands or the industries in which their companies operate, their comments often have more credibility with their network of contacts than when they speak about them in professional contexts.¹ Depending on the substance of their remarks, this can be a plus or a minus.² Many companies, including Patagonia Inc., an outdoor clothing and gear company based in Ventura, California; Société Générale, the Paris-based banking and financial services company; and Pernod Ricard, a

Paris-based producer of wine and spirits, encourage their employees to become “brand ambassadors” to consumers and job candidates on social networks such as LinkedIn and share the company culture on Facebook and Twitter. Businesses such as L’Oréal, the cosmetics company, have even implemented programs to accompany employees, including top management, on their digital journeys and help them communicate creatively and efficiently on social media.³

However, our research shows that for many companies, the opportunity to use employees as brand ambassadors has been only partially tapped. Although employers expect their employees — especially younger ones — to follow the employer’s brand on social media, share its brand links, recommend its products, and recommend the company to job candidates, we found that on the whole employees displayed very low brand engagement on social media. (See “About the Research.”) At a European consumer goods company we studied, for example, less than half of the employees followed the employer’s brand on social media. Managers at several companies we studied were

surprised to learn that their employees were not following them on Facebook or other popular social media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Yet when employees are not fans or supporters of the company’s products, this can send an ambiguous message to employees’ contacts and deprive the company of potential supporters.

So what can companies do? At a minimum, employers can remind employees that their behavior on social media can have negative consequences for the company. In addition, employees should be sensitized as to how their engagement on social media, such as “liking” their employers’ posts or sharing the employers’ achievements, can send positive messages to external stakeholders.

Unpacking Employee Branding

Corporate branding involves creating a unique image for the organization and its brand in the minds of key stakeholders. It reflects the organization’s effort to deliver its promise consistently to employees (internal branding), potential employees (employer branding), and customers (external branding). There has been little scholarly work

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Our insights on how employees engage in social media are based on two studies. The first looked at French, German, and Russian/Eastern European employees of a multinational company selling fast-moving consumer goods. The age of the survey respondents averaged 39.4 years, with a minimum age of 22 years and a maximum of 59 years. Overall, 77% of 353 respondents frequently used at least one social media platform; Google+ and Facebook were the most frequently used of them. Although employers may expect their employees (especially those who are members of Generation Y) to follow the employer brand on social media and share the employer brand links, recommend products, and recommend the company to job candidates, we found the surveyed employees actually showed very low brand engagement on social media. This held true for baby boomers as well as members of Generation X and

Generation Y, even when their level of job satisfaction was high.

We discussed the results with the multinational company’s CEO, marketing managers, digital managers, and online-community managers. The results highlighted the importance of employee brand engagement to behavior consistent with brand values. Also, we found that the role employees perceive they have on social media was strongly related to their brand advocacy on social media. The French and German samples displayed cultural differences: French employees were more likely to separate their personal use of social media from their professional use. It is likely that encouraging employees to strengthen brand performance on social media will be more effective in countries, such as Germany, where mixing professional and personal information is more common.

We tested the validity of the first study with a second study of

employees and managers in France working in private-sector companies with at least 50 employees. Respondents used at least one social media platform. Of the 252 respondents, 25.4% were managers, 60.3% nonmanagerial employees, and the rest top management (heads of departments and directors). Their average age was 42.8 years old. The most frequently used social media platforms were YouTube and Facebook, with a median usage between one hour and three hours per week.

The results of the second study supported the first study. The propensity of employees to engage in word of mouth was captured through three constructs: giving opinions, seeking opinions, and transmitting opinions. Social networks enabled dynamic diffusion of information, with a single person being a seeker, giver, and transmitter of information at once. The employees who naturally shared

information online were the ones who were the most sensitive to the endorsement of their employer brands on social media. Also, in online discussions, the perceptions of contacts with similar characteristics (“profiles”) influenced the credibility of the information shared within the group.

Results were discussed and interpreted with the input of digital managers, marketing managers, and human resource managers from five companies in three sectors. Through working sessions and an extensive search of the literature on employer branding and related constructs, we developed a set of recommendations to help organizations foster employee branding behaviors.

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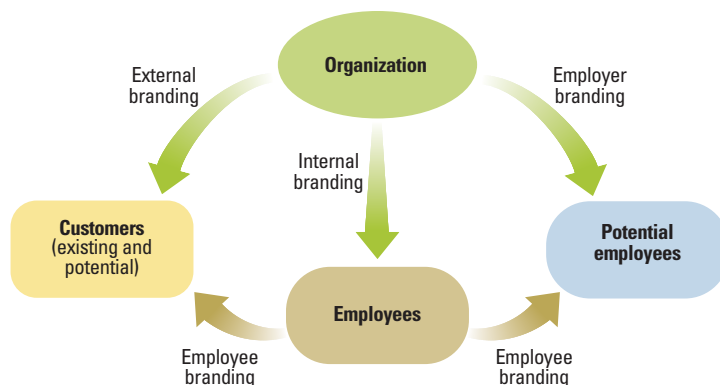
exploring the role of employees in the branding process outside the service sector, where the role of employees in delivering the brand promise to customers is paramount.⁴ However, with increased personal use of social network sites, it is becoming apparent that every employee on social media has a relationship with key stakeholders, be they colleagues, current or future clients, suppliers, or potential job candidates. This reality drives the desire to have employees interacting in positive and constructive ways in relation to their employer's brand, both in professional and private spheres.

Employee branding is a process whereby employees internalize the company brand image and project that image to customers, job candidates, and other stakeholders.⁵ It differs from *employer branding* (which aims to enhance the organization's image in order to attract and retain talented employees) and *internal branding* (which focuses on employee motivation to achieve organizational objectives and provide customer satisfaction).⁶ What's more, employee branding goes beyond internal marketing in that it motivates employees to communicate the brand image to multiple stakeholders, as opposed to merely satisfying their own needs in an employee-customer interface.⁷ We treat employee branding as the outcome of a process that begins with employees internalizing the brand and that leads them to endorse the brand externally with both customers and potential employees. (See "Understanding Employees' Role in Branding.") Whereas corporate branding delivers the organization's explicit promise to key stakeholders, employee branding conveys the promise when employees internalize it and endorse it either explicitly or implicitly through brand-consistent behaviors.

In the retail and hospitality sectors, research has shown that customer satisfaction is directly tied to employees' attitudes and behaviors.⁸ In addition, employee branding is being examined increasingly in relation to human resources functions.⁹ Although the research on employee branding for attracting job candidates is relatively new, a growing number of companies are encouraging their existing employees to use social media to attract new ones. At Pernod Ricard's wine division, for example, young hires post photos and information about their jobs to an Instagram account ([prfuturevintage](#)).¹⁰

UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEES' ROLE IN BRANDING

Corporate branding delivers the explicit promise of the organization to key stakeholders. Employee branding conveys that promise to customers or potential hires when employees internalize the brand promise and endorse it explicitly or implicitly, through brand-consistent behaviors.



Employees explicitly endorse an employer brand on social media when they comment positively on the brand to their contacts, recommend the brand, share links, pass on information, or endorse the brand's values. Also, employees might refer to their brands indirectly by discussing relevant issues or through their behavior on social media. (For example, when a teacher discusses issues related to education on social media, his opinions might be seen as being endorsed by his employer even if the employer isn't specifically mentioned.)

For our research, we studied employee-branding behaviors on social media based on four dimensions: word of mouth, endorsement, sharing, and culture. (See "Assessing Employee Branding Behaviors on Social Media," p. 66.) As a starting point, employers can conduct anonymous surveys about employee behavior on social media with regard to the company brand. This can sensitize employees to how their engagement on social media can benefit the employer brand. Surveys can be broadened to include evaluations of employee job satisfaction and employee voice, which we found to be two strong antecedents of willingness to participate in employee branding. However, we found that even when employee satisfaction is high and employee voice is valued inside the organization, most employees are not as engaged as we expected. This raises the question: What can companies do to encourage employees to become effective brand ambassadors?

Fostering Employee Branding on Social Media

We identified several factors that stand in the way of employee branding behaviors on social media. First, at the organizations we studied, there was often a lack of understanding among employees of the organization's social media strategy; many employees were even ignorant of their employers' social media activity. Second, employees were insufficiently aware of the importance of their role on social media. Most employees didn't know what was expected from them; one employee out of three could not say whether their company had a social media policy establishing do's and don'ts for them on social media. Third, there was discomfort around using social media in professional settings. This factor was more pronounced among senior employees (both in terms of age and position within the organization) and among employees who maintained a strict separation between their private and professional spheres. Based on these and other factors, we were able to develop a set of five best practices and

recommendations for encouraging effective employee branding on social media.

1. Empower a stable of employee advocates.

Certain groups are more conscious than others of the importance of endorsing their employer's brand on social media. While young and senior employees alike have embraced social media in their personal communications to some degree, those who were born in the era of the internet — so-called “digital natives” — tend to be more active. Compared with Generation Xers or baby boomers, they typically maintain less separation between professional and personal information.¹¹ They are also more accustomed to voicing approval and disapproval on social media. Accordingly, young adults are more likely to become brand ambassadors for the company on social media. However, we found that an employee's age does not necessarily dictate the role he or she plays in promoting a brand on social media. As long as employees understand the role they can play on social media and how to engage with it, brand-building behaviors

ASSESSING EMPLOYEE BRANDING BEHAVIORS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Companies can map the extent of employee engagement on social media with their employer brand across four dimensions. Top management likely expects employees to be engaging in all 14 items across the four dimensions below. The reality, however, is probably different; in the companies we studied, the vast majority of employees engaged in fewer than seven of the 14 behaviors.

EMPLOYEE WORD OF MOUTH

1. I speak (positively) about my employer brand on social media.
2. I praise the achievements of my employer brand on social media.
3. When I have a criticism about my employer, I refrain from sharing it online.
4. I do not post comments about my employer online that I might regret later.

EMPLOYEE ENDORSEMENT

5. I am a fan/I follow my employer brand on social media.
6. I recommend my employer brand products and services to my contacts on social media.
7. I recommend my company to potential job candidates.
8. I respond (constructively) when my contacts criticize my employer brand products or services on social media.

EMPLOYEE SHARING

9. I pass along information about my employer brand on social media.
10. I “like” content posted by my employer.
11. I share links to/from the employer brand on social media.

EMPLOYEE CULTURE

12. I keep in mind that I could harm my employer brand when interacting on social media.
13. I behave on social media in a way that is consistent with my employer brand values and culture.
14. I communicate on topics related to my employer's business in a way my employer would approve of.

are similar across generations. Across our studies, we found that Generation X and baby boomer respondents used social media regularly, but they tended to be more comfortable using media passively (for example, reading posts) than they were sharing content or posting comments. Consequently, the first step toward building a collective digital culture may be to encourage digital natives to set the tone and help remove the psychological barriers senior employees feel toward social media engagement. This may involve “reverse mentoring,” where younger employees help their colleagues increase their social media competence.¹² At L’Oréal, for example, digital natives work with senior employees to coach them on social media.¹³

Interestingly, the more overlap employees have in their profiles with others in their network, the more likely they are to display brand-building behaviors on social media.¹⁴ Indeed, they are more likely to endorse the employer brand in their personal online interactions because they believe their contacts may have a similar interest in the employer brand. Moreover, they display brand-building behaviors naturally — not out of obligation. Many employee advocates on social media hold off on endorsing their employer brand until some of their contacts make the first move. A powerful example of this can be found in the response by employees and customers to the firing in 2014 of the popular CEO of Market Basket Inc., a Tewksbury, Massachusetts-based supermarket chain. By banding together online (#SaveMarketBasket, #ArtieT), employees and customers were instrumental in reinstating the CEO and preserving the company’s distinctive organizational culture.¹⁵ The Market Basket case highlights the potential effect of rallying key constituencies to endorse the employer brand.

Employees can also play an influential role in shaping the company’s social media strategy. Initiatives on social media that unite employees in relation to their employers, such as employer groups championed by community managers, provide a forum for active advocates. Internal social network platforms, such as Yammer and Workplace by Facebook, can also be useful. Generally, companies should ask employee advocates for their feedback and include them in discussions on how to improve the impact of social media activities.

2. Outline the boundaries of employees’ social media presence. Employees display brand-building behaviors when they understand their role in the branding process.¹⁶ When they feel partly responsible for the company’s success, they are willing to invest in activities to enhance the customer experience.¹⁷ Similarly, when employees perceive they can play a role in the success of the brand online, they are willing to exhibit brand-building behaviors through their digital networks and on social media sites. Curiously, in our surveys, many employees said that they didn’t think it necessary to “like” their employer brand or share posts with their contacts.

Once employees understand they have a role to play, they need to learn social media etiquette for when and how to mention the employer. Often, many employees aren’t aware whether their company has a social media policy. Its guidelines should be outlined and communicated company-wide, with clear descriptions of what managers consider acceptable.¹⁸ Bear in mind, too, that the employees’ involvement in social media can become a liability. For example, in a company operating in the luxury sector, employees had to be reminded that the items they were proudly crafting and personalizing for prestigious clients had to be kept secret and could not be posted on Instagram. Also, spending hours on social media during the workday, including generating posts aimed at creating value for the employer brand, might send a negative message to external stakeholders. In a nutshell, employers should sensitize employees to the risks of blurring their professional and personal spheres on social media (specifically noting statements and behaviors to avoid and issues that employees shouldn’t discuss).

In addition to pointing out risks, companies can benefit by training employees on the basics of social media. For example, many employees are not Twitter-literate. Many employees we observed or met were not endorsing their employer brand because they didn’t really know how to do so. Some of their questions were fairly elementary ones on topics such as how to retweet and what hashtags are used for. Digital natives who were introduced to Facebook when they were teenagers are often amazed when their parents ask them to translate Twitter-speak into English. Rather than expecting older employees to use their own social media

accounts to share information on the brand, they can be encouraged to simply comment on the company Facebook page or on sites such as Glassdoor, where employee feedback is posted anonymously. From instructing employees on the use of social media tools to educating them on social media metrics, different forms of training can be configured to support the digital brand-building activities of different categories of employees. Senior management should participate in the training sessions as well. L'Oréal, for example, trains all managers, including those at the very top, to become proficient in using digital tools.

3. Foster brand engagement. Organizations should foster employees' identification with their brand by encouraging employee brand commitment, defined as a psychological attachment and loyalty to the employer.¹⁹ When employees demonstrate high levels of commitment to the employer, they have internalized the desired brand image. This combined sense of belonging and engagement becomes solidified through the employees' attachment to the job and to the brand, and by their developing a high level of trust in their ability to safely voice their opinions internally. Employee brand-building behaviors are rarely rewarded. However, they enhance organizational performance and help portray the workplace in a favorable light externally.²⁰

Employee brand engagement encompasses both an *emotional* dimension, through emotional attachment, pride, and personal meaning,²¹ and a *rational* dimension, through internalizing the values and understanding the heritage of the brand. Across our studies, we have found that employees who understand the brand promise and have an emotional attachment to their brand are more likely to invest in brand-building behaviors on social media. Training on brand building might be useful in making the brand platform available to everyone within the organization.

To foster brand engagement, management needs to establish clear expectations regarding employee behavior that are consistent with the "psychological contract." This contract needs to be grounded both in internal communication (via messages about what the organization feels is important) and in external communication (via awareness of corporate and brand-name communication efforts as

conveyed through advertising, public relations, and social media). Here, too, internal networks such as Yammer or Workplace by Facebook are important, helping to create an employer brand community and promote a link between internal and external brand representations.

Having an employer brand community makes it easier for employees to endorse the brand on social media. Nurturing the brand community fosters a sense of belonging and serves to encourage employees to support the employer's strategic branding initiatives.²² Within the brand communities of academic institutions we surveyed, the most popular posts were related to personal achievement (for example, how an employee did in a triathlon) or social gatherings (for example, an annual company summer barbecue or holiday party). Blurring the boundaries between personal and professional events helps employees spread information about the employer culture throughout social media.

4. Make content relevant and easy to share. Employees perceive their role in social media as important to the company as long as they see the brand as being active. Brand external communication not only affects employees' image of their company's brand, it also shapes their brand-building behaviors and encourages them to be active participants. Research shows that a perception of high quality in external communication such as advertisements can positively influence how employees identify with their employer brands; specifically, it motivates salespeople to devote more effort to the brand.²³ Thus, a brand that's perceived as being actively present on social media sends an implicit message to employees that social media is important to building the brand (which, in turn, encourages employees to communicate externally via these networks).

However, being present on social media, while important, is not sufficient. In order to turn employees into brand ambassadors, it's essential that the company have relevant content to share. Across our studies, many employees regarded their employers' social media content as not compelling enough to share. To address this problem, companies need to include their employees in brand content generation and invite them to be key participants in brand social media activities. At a minimum, content should be presented in a format that's easy to share and

communicate in real time. For instance, one employee told us he had discovered an ad posted on YouTube by his employer only after it had already been posted for several weeks. Information needs to be updated frequently and shared with employees. In addition, companies can provide tools and assistance to help employees generate content. L'Oréal Canada, for example, encourages employees to develop creative content on social media using its "content factory," which maintains an online library of video tutorials, product pictures, product reviews, and testimonials to facilitate employee engagement with customers.

5. Reward employee voice. Research indicates that employees respond more positively to intrinsic psychological rewards such as public recognition than to extrinsic rewards such as bonuses, which can even have negative effects.²⁴ Moreover, employee branding on social media is effective only if the employee's voice is seen as authentic and sincere. The most effective rewards are straightforward but often overlooked. They include listening to employee feedback, paying attention to employee suggestions, and congratulating employees on their achievements.²⁵ The consequences of ignoring these potential rewards can be serious. For example, we spoke to a manager who did not feel she was adequately recognized for supporting her company brand on her personal blog. Her response was to tone down her testimonials and hold off from sharing company news via her blog and other social media platforms.

Many companies use extrinsic reward systems to encourage employees to participate in internal social networks. Some companies award employees points when they post comments or for the number of shares or "likes" they receive on their posts.²⁶ However, such systems carry a risk that employers will be seen as manipulating employee voice and intruding in employees' private lives. The power of employee brand building lies in giving employees freedom to express themselves within the boundaries outlined by the organization. For example, employers might find ways to link their social media advocacy to an incentive system for employee referrals. For instance, ShoreTel Inc., a telecommunications company based in Sunnyvale, California, tracks incoming candidates via links employees share through their personal social media accounts.²⁷ ShoreTel employees report valuing a privileged relationship on social media with top

management, and this experience encouraged them to share or retweet information. However, such a system is only possible if top management leads and champions brand-building behaviors on social media.

If employers want employees to be constructive and engaged on behalf of their brands on social media, they need to respect the personal nature of how employees express themselves on social media. The company's interest in employee branding should not extend to policing employees' behaviors online or requiring access to their colleagues' social media profiles. If and when online-community managers encounter anonymous employee comments on sites such as Glassdoor, rather than be defensive, they can address the comments with transparency while emphasizing organizational safety. The foundation of employee branding is mutual trust and respect between employer and employees.

Implications for Companies

During our research working sessions, managers at several companies expressed concern that their employees were neither fans of their Facebook pages nor following their employer brand on Twitter, Instagram, or LinkedIn. In today's social media-focused environment, employees are often a valuable source of information for both customers and job candidates. At a time when organizations everywhere are encouraging customers and other constituencies to recommend their brands on social media, not being able to present the voice of your employees may communicate lackluster enthusiasm on the part of employees toward the company.

Past research indicates that organizations seeking to become leaders need to clearly state what is expected from employees and train them adequately on brand values and heritage.²⁸ Further, we recommend that companies find ways to integrate social media into internal branding strategies and training. In branding goods and services, the entire workforce needs to be trained to deliver the brand promise and engage actively with potential customers and job candidates on a day-to-day basis.

Marie-Cécile Cervellon is a professor of marketing at EDHEC Business School in Nice, France.

Pamela Lirio is an assistant professor of international human resource management at the University of Montreal's School of Industrial Relations in Montreal, Canada. Comment on this

article at <http://sloanreview.mit.edu/x/58201>, or contact the authors at smrfeedback@mit.edu.

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