



Professional or interactive: CEOs' image strategies in the microblogging context



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ABSTRACT

Microblogging platforms are gaining popularity among corporations and their top management in recent years. Although microblogging services like Twitter and Sina Weibo are now prevalently used for managing CEOs' images and public relations, few studies have examined the effects of these practices on the loyalty of target audiences. This study examined the effect of CEO image strategy on follower loyalty in the microblogging context. Based on the self-presentation theory, four types of CEO image strategies were identified, namely the Expert, Friend, Textbook, and Daybook strategies. These categories were identified based on the levels of interactivity and professionalism of the CEOs on their microblogs. An online survey was used to collect data from microblog users, that is, the CEOs' followers. The results showed that CEO image strategy influences follower loyalty in the microblogging context and that Chinese microblog users are fondest of CEOs who present themselves as experts rather than as friends (H1). The results also showed that usage orientation moderates the effect of CEO image on follower loyalty (H2) and that goal orientation positively influences CEOs with a highly professional image.

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1. Introduction

From a business perspective, social media has significantly changed the way companies communicate with their consumers. In contrast to mass media, social media allows consumers to voice their opinions and share information and experiences with companies to fellow consumers. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as being "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p. 61). Social media in general and microblogs in particular provide means to interact with customers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Twitter, the global microblogging pioneer, was originally developed for mobile phones, designed to let people post short, 140-character text updates or 'tweets' to a network of others. Tweets could be spread further when participants repost tweets through their accounts introducing content to new audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Microblogging services have gained popularity in recent years. The number of active users for Twitter was 255 million as of March 31, 2014 (Twitter, 2014). The advances in social media are offering an unprecedentedly easy, convenient, and flexible way for corporate leaders to manage their public relations

and personal images. The CEO's image and the corporation's reputation both play major roles in determining a company's success in building relationships with diverse stakeholders (Jin & Yeo, 2011). Some 54 percent of top executives surveyed by Yankelovich Partners, a marketing services consultancy, "believed that at least half of a company's corporate reputation could be attributed to the public image of its CEO" (Business Editors., 2001).

For top-level executives, social media can provide opportunities to form new relationships as well as strengthen existing relationships with customers, investors, employees, and the public (Karaduman, 2013). According to a survey of employees by social media branding firm BRAND fog (2014), the majority of US and UK respondents believe that CEO engagement on social media helps to communicate company values and shapes a company's brand reputation. Another study on the online activities of CEOs from 50 of the world's largest companies demonstrated that in 2012, 66% were deemed a "social CEO" in that they appeared in videos on the company's YouTube channel or had a public and verifiable profile on Facebook and Twitter; this figure is nearly double that in 2010 (Weber Shandwick., 2013).

China is the most active microblogging market in the world. According to the China Internet Network Information Center (2014), the administrative agency responsible for Internet affairs under the Ministry of Information Industry, there were 281 million users of microblogging services in China by the end of 2013, many of whom follow popular business leaders in the country. For

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example, Kai-Fu Lee, the CEO of Innovation Works and former president of Google China, and Yun Ma, the CEO of the Alibaba Group, are some of the well-known business leaders on the Chinese version of Twitter ‘Sina Weibo’, each with over 50 million and 15 million followers, respectively, as of April 30, 2014.

Although microblogging platforms like Twitter and Sina Weibo are now prevalently used for managing CEOs’ images and public relations, few studies have examined the effects of these practices on the loyalty of target audiences. Many companies are experimenting with microblogging platforms, but few studies provide guidance on the best microblogging practices for corporations (Burton & Soboleva, 2011). In this study, we explored the image strategy for CEOs that has a more significant and positive effect on follower loyalty in the context of a CEO’s microblog. Based on the self-presentation theory, we classified image strategies of CEOs communicating through microblogging platforms according to their level of professionalism and interactivity with their followers. The four CEO image strategy categories are Expert, Friend, Textbook, and Daybook. Usage orientation was used as a moderator to examine the effects of those strategies on follower loyalty. Using online survey, the research examined the different effects of the four categories of CEO image strategies on follower loyalty.

2. Theory and hypotheses development

Self-presentation “consists of behaviors designed to make a desired impression on others” (Vohs, Baumeister, & Ciarocco, 2005, p. 633). A person can present multiple facets of his or her personality at different occasions rather than a simple unified self (James, 1950). On microblogging platforms, CEOs communicate to both internal and external stakeholders and are motivated to present different versions of themselves to accommodate their target audiences. For instance, CEOs could present themselves as experts owing to their rich knowledge in an industry or a technological field, or as mentors to youth owing to their desirable social experience.

2.1. Professionalism

Jameson (2014) defined professional communication as “that which arises from a person’s work, vocation, or organizational roles, whereas personal communication arises from other roles and context.” (p. 11). By taking advantage of the convenient interactions with followers on microblogging platforms, CEOs could narrow the psychological distance that usually exists between them and customers, enhance their reputation, and better present themselves. However, social media demands “quick, unscripted updates that can quickly go viral—poses risks for top managers and the companies they represent, in the form of lawsuits, leaked trade secrets or angered customers” (Kwoh & Korn, 2012). The first rule of microblogging is to focus on messages that are relevant for the target group (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011). Online personal branding requires that information be accessible to others, which in turn puts people at risk in terms of misdirected and insufficient branding (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011). Traditionally, companies discourage employees from discussing business-related information outside the workplace. According to Jameson (2014) work-related communication can be shared with a wide range of audiences, however communicators should carefully determine the risk–benefit ratio of doing so. Therefore, CEOs have to establish rules for their microblogging practices and manage the boundaries between what should be public and private, professional and personal.

2.2. Interactivity

Social media is structured first and foremost to facilitate sharing and dialogue with other members. Goffman (1959) pointed out

that impression management is embedded in social interactivity. Interactivity in this context could be defined as the extent to which a CEO’s microblogging communication represents a two-way conversation (Lee & Shin, 2012). The two major advantages of microblogging platforms are one-to-many broadcasting and one-to-one interactivity. Unlike in other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), following a microblog usually does not require permission or any reciprocal communication before making a connection. Microblogging platforms usually offer interactivity tools such as hashtags, URL links, mentions, replies, and forwards. A CEO may well decide to be proactive and initiate conversations and/or be reactive, typically responding to followers’ posts and discussions.

Thus, based on the content of a CEO’s communication (professional vs. personal) and social media’s most prominent trait (interactivity), we developed a typology matrix for CEOs’ image strategies in the microblogging context, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

We classified CEO image strategies into four types, which are described below:

2.2.1. Expert

The content of the messages posted by both the CEOs and their followers are highly related to the CEOs’ industry, such as technological trends in the related fields, market forecasts, and new product development. CEOs classified as experts are highly active in addressing questions, responding to followers’ suggestions or comments, and forwarding business-related messages.

2.2.2. Friend

While the CEOs classified as friends are highly interactive with their followers, the content of their messages are less related to their industries. Rather, the message topics cover diverse aspects of life, such as popular social issues, life philosophies, and hobbies, like sports.

2.2.3. Textbook

The content of the messages of CEOs classified as textbook are professional like those of Expert CEOs, but the interactions between the CEOs and their followers are lower. The CEOs hardly initiate discussions with or respond to followers.

2.2.4. Daybook

The content of the messages of CEOs classified as daybook neither indicate professionalism nor interactivity. The content of the messages appear like the CEOs’ routine activities in their daybook, devoid of emotion or interest in their followers’ responses.

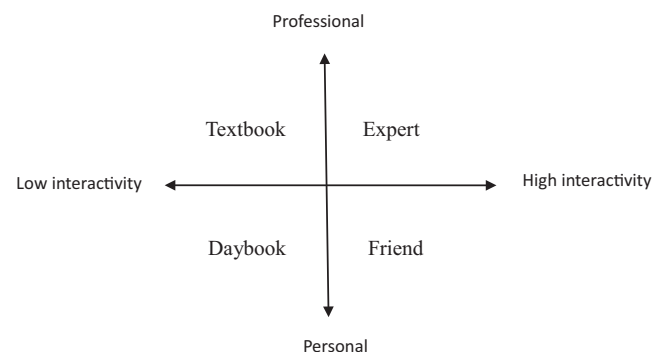


Fig. 1. Image strategy of CEOs on their microblogs.

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