



## Employees as Social Media Influencers

### How organisations can get workers to post more company-related content willingly.

Dell is doing it. MasterCard too. Even **universities**, not exactly bastions of social media influence, are embracing it. Employee advocacy in social media is **gaining currency** as an effective way to promote an organisation by the very people who work in it. Rather than creating adverts or hiring social media influencers to boost a brand, companies like Vodafone and Starbucks to schools like Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) are tapping staff members at all levels to become brand ambassadors, with arguably improved conviction and results.

In 2015, two years after **Dell** launched its employee advocacy programme, its employees shared more than 150,000 pieces of content with 1.2 million people, driving 45,000 clicks to the computer-maker's website. At **OsloMet**, Norway's third-largest university, 15 individual shares by student and employee advocates had the same social reach as a post on the university's Facebook page, which had 30,000 followers when the university began driving employee advocacy in earnest three years ago.

Encouraging rank and file workers to promote the brand they work for makes sound business sense considering **regular employees are trusted more than CEOs** by the general public and **eight in ten people trust recommendations from people they know**.

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There has been much research on whether or how employees engage in social media activities and support their companies' brands, but few, if any, studies on employee advocacy have examined the role of corporate social media activity – content created by a company itself. My **paper**, published in *European Management Journal*, seeks to plug this gap. Co-authored with Grzegorz Mazurek of Kozminski University and Michael Haenlein of ESCP Europe, it shows that corporate brand strength in itself is not sufficient to mobilise employees to post company-related content on social media. However, a company could signal its brand strength with corporate social media activity, which in turn inspires employees to post company related content.

### Brand strength is not enough

We invited university academics who had published in the Financial Times Top 50 journals to take part in a survey we designed. We chose scholars because they are a class of employee that uses social media to enhance personal brand image. They also double up as front-line employees who directly interact with "customers", i.e. students, playing a crucial role in management and marketing.

Participants filled an online questionnaire about employee engagement with organisation-related content, corporate brand strength and social media

activity, and employee social media activity and social media network. The measures consisted of multi-item scales we adapted from previous research. For organisational social media activity, we asked participants whether their institutions were highly active on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, and ResearchGate. Answers were coded in a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. To measure the frequency of company-related posts by employees on the same four platforms, we developed a six-point Likert scale ranging from 1="always" to 6="never".

Corporate brand strength was examined with questions such as "Overall, how do you feel about the university you work for", with answers ranging from "very low quality" to "very high quality" and "not at all desirable" to "very desirable". Another item states "I believe that students that graduate from the university are: better prepared/worse prepared; very satisfied/not satisfied; successful/not successful; highly credible professionals/not credible".

The results of our survey, based on 96 responses from participants in 19 countries, showed that corporate brand strength had no significant impact on participants' company-related posts on social media. However, corporate brand strength was correlated with corporate social media activity, which, in turn, was positively associated with participants' company-related posts. Participants' network size was positively associated with the number of participants' company-related posts.

Our findings contradict those of previous **studies** that showed *consumers* were more willing to repost corporate content of stronger brands. Our findings also indicate that employees whose organisations frequently post content on social media may be more inspired to post company-related content than employees whose companies are less active, assuming similar brand strength. In other words, an organisation that wants to promote employee advocacy cannot bank on the strength of its curated brand alone; it has to consistently create and post corporate content, making it easier for employees to share content with their own network.

Further, the relationship between corporate brand strength and an employee's posts on company-related content goes both ways, each mediated by corporate social media activity, our analysis shows. Put another way, employee posts may boost corporate brand strength, but only when corporate social media activity is frequent.

## Two-way street

Among major companies with formal employee advocacy programmes, Vodafone and Reebok stand

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out in proactively creating shareable corporate content. **Go Social**, Vodafone UK's programme, offers a wide range of material posted on the telecom group's consumer blog, as well as external Vodafone news stories for employees to share. They also submit their own content to Go Social which, once approved, is made available for others to share. Reebok has a similar two-way approach: The sportswear company creates articles and blog posts that it shares with employees, and vets and shares content created by its workers.

Besides corporate content generation, organisations that want to join the employee advocacy bandwagon would do well to follow current industry best practices. First, keep it authentic. When Dell rolled out its advocacy programme in 2013, it invited, rather than mandated, its employees to participate. The programme proved to be so popular that by mid-2015, more than 10,000 employees had enrolled and recruitment had to be slowed. The company also encourages its advocates to curate and share content they find interesting and relevant to customers, keeping only 20 percent of their posts for company-related content.

Second, sustain enthusiasm by keeping things fun and acknowledging staff advocates for their efforts. Adobe holds contests like one which asked employees to design t-shirts that illustrate what "Adobe Life" means to them. It created a high level of social engagement and t-shirts sold out within days. Every week, the company's internal communications team also searches social media for photos and messages employees are sharing using #AdobeLife and highlights some of the best on Adobe's digital signage in every office.

Marketers and consumers are no longer the chief arbiters of a brand's strength on social media; workers have a strong voice too. When done right, advocacy programmes show that employees are truly a company's greatest asset.

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