Los empleados como portavoz de la empresa en la web 2.0: enfoques y estrategias de política de medios sociales

The employees as corporate spokesperson in web2.0: approaches and strategies of social media policy

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Resumen:
¿Cómo comunicar en redes sociales sin generar una crisis, como afirmar su reputación y ganar credibilidad y consentimiento?
Por el momento, en la literaturá no hay una perspectiva única, pero hay una serie de modelos de comunicación (Owyang, J. 2012): el modelo centralizado de Hube y Hube múltiple, donde las principales funciones están asignadas al personal que maneja las situaciones de crisis y los medios sociales. Pero la cuestión más sensible en cuanto al papel de los empleados activos en la red, que este documento tiene por objeto examinar. De acuerdo con la adopción de los principios adecuados y documentos de política de comportarse en las redes sociales, algunas empresas prohíben a sus empleados para navegar por la web y en las redes sociales durante las horas de trabajo, y en particular a expresarse como empleados, otros, en cambio, recurren a ellas como portavoz.

En este artículo se presenta un estudio sobre las mejores prácticas de las empresas que utilizan sus empleados como portavoz corporativa, obteniendo rendimientos evidentes en términos de reputación. El análisis presentado en el documento presenta los resultados de un estudio de algunas empresas que ofrecen las mejores condiciones de trabajo, y goza de gran reputación en la red, seleccionados de acuerdo con su posición en la clasificación mundial (Great Place at Work, Interbrand, Reputation Institute) y, para cada uno de ellos, se examinan - utilizando el análisis de documentos de la empresa - el modo de gestión de la organización de la comunicación en red, la política, en línea con la misión y valores corporativos, el papel desempeñado por los empleados como un testimonio, además de sensación de los resultados de tales acciones obtenidas por portavoces, a través de un análisis textual de las discusiones en la red. El resultado esperado es identificar las mejores prácticas que también se pueden aplicar a las empresas que, hasta ahora, aún no han experimentado este enfoque, además de comprender también los posibles riesgos y limitaciones que han surgido de las experiencias examinadas.
Palabras clave: Comunicación corporativa, reputación, gestión de crisis, portavoz, política de medios sociales, responsabilidad social de las empresas.

Abstract:
How to communicate on the social network without generating a crisis, as affirm its reputation, credibility and to have crebility and consensus? At the moment, there isn’t a unique perspective, indeed, there are a number of social media communication models (Owyang, J. 2012), from centralized model to hube and spokes multiple, where the main functions are assigned to the staff of social media management and crisis management. But the most sensitive issue relates to the role of active employees in the network, on which this paper intends to make a focus. Besideses the adoption of appropriate principles cards and social media policy, some companies forbid their employees to surf the web and in social during working hours, and especially to express themselves as employees, other, on the contrary, choose to use them as testimonials.

In this paper we want to present a study on best practices of those companies that use their employees as corporate spokesperson, obtaining obvious returns in terms of reputation. The analysis is presented in the paper reports the results of a survey of some companies that provide the best working conditions, and who enjoy a high reputation in the network, selected based on their ranking in the most reliable in the world rankings (Great Place at Work, Interbrand, Reputation Institute, Altimeter Group, etc.) and, for each of them, are examined - using analysis of company documents - organizational management mode of networked communication, the social media policy be adopted, consistent with the mission and values business, the role played by employees as testimonials and feedback obtained on the net result of such actions, through a textual analysis of the discussions on the net. The expected result is to identify best practices that can be applied also to those businesses that, until now, have not yet experienced this approach, but also understand the possible risks and limitations that have emerged from experiences examined.

Keywords: Corporate Communication, Reputation, Crisis Management, Spokeperson, Social Media Policy, Corporate Social Responsibility.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Companies need to be present, visible and active on the web in order to be competitive In the present era. How should this be achieved, while avoiding negative feedback? Who should be responsible for social network communication in an organization and what links to other departments should be in place? How should the activity on the net by employees, both as users and as company representatives, be managed?

This paper addresses these issues. At present, there is no single perspective in response to the above questions, or rather, different models of social media communication
management, both in terms of conception and application, are being used, the debate being still clearly open. Asma El Ouirdi et. al. (2015) identify about 4,000 academic articles produced between 2010 and 2013 dedicated to the spread of corporate social media, but only a few of them cover how specific companies manage their own web communications. Concerning crisis communication, the available literature indicates communications are generally entrusted to institutional leadership (President, CEO or spokesperson), with the support of web sites, blogs, blogging and social media. How companies deal with daily social media communication, however, is less clear, a number of strategies being identified. Some companies centralize the process, still relying on the CEO or spokesperson, with messages being pre-set carefully. Most enterprises set up specialized staff who combine logic and skills of Social Media Management with Crisis Management. In these cases, communication is primarily handled by community managers responsible for dialoguing with people and monitoring their mood, while the crisis unit prepares plans of action should emergency situations arise1. The third way, sometimes alternative and sometimes complementary to the previous one, foresees all employees as acting as company spokespeople. Such an approach is typical in sectors having a highly developed digital culture, as in the IT and telecommunications sectors. This trend has developed in the United States, especially over the last fifteen years. According to an American study (Edelman, 2006), as early as 2003, 20% of respondents claimed they would trust information they received from an employees - "a person like me" - rather than the CEO. By 2008, (Edelman, 2008), the share had increased to 65%, reaching its highest peak. In the latest survey (Edelman, 2016), 63% of respondents still view employees more credible than corporate leaders.

This is one of the reasons prompting Brian Solis (2011: 282) to stress the need for organizations to transform themselves from rigid to open and adaptive structures, and to adopt predictive business models. Paul Adler, Charles Heckscher and Laurence Prusak (2011: 44-52) identify four principles (or strategies of action) that can help build a collaborative and open community: 1) define a common goal 2) cultivate an ethic of collaboration 3) facilitate processes of coordination 4 ) create an infrastructure to enhance and stimulate collaboration. However, change in this direction seems rather slow, and not yet widespread. Some authors (Anne Linke and Ansgar Zerfass, 2013: 270-286; Yan Huang, Param Singh V. & Anindya Ghose, 2015) still identify significant differences between organizational models desired and those actually implemented. According to Jackie Marfleet (2008: 153), the tendency is to maintain a rather centralized control. From this, a silos effect risks being produced, whereby a company's operative units tend to act separately, with information essentially being exchanged vertically. This mechanism reduces the interdependence, functionality and efficiency of a system (Fabrizio Maimone, 2007).

In a collaborative community, instead, collaboration occurs across several teams and, especially in large companies, infrastructures allow a single employee to take part in more than one team, so promoting decentralized decision-making, and the circulation

of knowledge. Hence, a kind of "participatory centralization" is created within a matrix structure\(^2\), encouraging not only continual renewal of processes to cope with changes and crisis, but also innovation and experimentation, as foreseen by a model of "overlapping spheres of influence", whereby various groups stimulate and influence each other (Paul Adler, Charles Heckscher, Laurence Prusak, 2011: 44-52; Michael L. Kent, 2013: 337-345). This also favours the development of *expressive individuality*, both within an organization, by leading to improved information sharing, collaboration and internal relations (e.g. recognition of common interests), and also outside it, by greater sharing of personal information with users on the social media, potentially converting them from consumer to customer (Bruce D. Weinberg, et al., 2013: 306-307).

Here, it is useful to present the model by Jeremiah Owyang (2010\(^3\)) (though somewhat adapted by the present author), which outlines the following types of organizational structures for the Social Media Management:

- **centralized:** these are hierarchical structures. All activities planned and implemented in web environments are generally controlled to avoid risk of overlapping across business units. The advantage is the projection of a clear corporate identity to the outside world, while the downside is the possible creation of a fixed or rigid image due to the silo effect, due to the lack of communication between departments.
- **decentralized:** such structures are common in corporations with a matrix organization, where activities are done by various areas, often present in different parts of the world, requiring direct supervision, mutual adaptation between business units and standardization of processes, results and competencies. The activities appear more dynamic, but difficulties of coordination can arise, with the risk that some units remain isolated. Decentralization can occur in different ways and create different models of organizational structure:
  - **coordinated:** this radial structure consists of a support team (hub or enabler) for every business, territorial or functional unit (nodes). This core team (hub) reports the activities made in the periphery directly to top management, and is responsible for monitoring and measuring the results obtained from social actions. While a very effective model, the outlay is high due to the management and human resources required, and the structure may become a controlling, rather than facilitating factor, centralizing decisions;
  - **hub and spoke:** this is a more complex form of the previous model, often applied in large international organizations. It consists of a central hub and peripheral hubs that coordinate and provide services to different groups of nodes (hubs and business units). Greater autonomy of the constellations is achieved, while still maintaining a unified strategy for each. It is particularly useful for units working in different cultural contexts requiring targeted communications. However, managing, coordinating, sharing problems and deciding on best practices is very complex. This limitation can be overcome by using the shared virtual workspace, though this, too, can lead to too many "voices" and varying positions, hindering consensus. HP and IBM use this model;
  - **holistic system (or honeycomb):** this is the most suitable model for collaborative and participatory philosophy of web 2.0. All employees know the social practices, communicate with one another, and directly manage relations with customers. This particularly occurs in the IT and service companies in network sites, such as, Intel, Dell, and Zappos. People are a strategic resource to invest in, and, therefore, through continual education, in the absence of control, objectives are defined and rules of conduct ensured, with individual responsibility, a sense of corporate membership and cooperation, allowing an optimal level of work to be done from the bottom up. According to Jeremiah Owyang (2011) structured programs are required, to provide resources, training and strategies in different business units. Costs are subsequently reduced, efficiency increased and operational procedures standardized. In spirit of collaboration, employees listen to the users and gather information useful for the organization to act upon. For example, customer service detects a problem with a USB port on laptops, share this information with the engineering department and the latter acts to improve the product and increase customer satisfaction.

According to Jeremiah Owyang, the transition from a centralized to a decentralized model seems to have occurred, although, Hub & Spoke models, whether complex or not, are mainly at the expense of a holistic approach. In 2013, in a research carried out for Altimeter Group, the author indicated the following distribution of organizational models in companies worldwide: Central (10.8%), Decentralized (29.8%), Hub & Spoke (41%), Hub & Spoke multiple (18%), Holistic (1.4%). He also foresaw a gradual evolution from one model to the next more advanced one (starting from the most centralized onwards), as a more open, sharing culture spread among hubs.

A strategic use of social media in corporate communications, especially a decentralized approach in its various forms, requires trained, responsible people, cutting-edge

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\(^2\) The matrix structure includes the presence of teams that work to implement projects: the resources allocated to the project and the necessary functions to achieve the purpose are selected from the organization departments. It requires greater flexibility and efficiency of the process, skills optimization and integrated project management; Barbara Mazza, Renato Fontana, 2001.

\(^3\) For a detailed discussion of Owyang model you are also seen Olivier Blachard, 2012 and Vincenzo Cosenza, 2012.
technologies, adequate budgets, as well as monitoring and continuous feedback, advanced editorial routines, and, most importantly, a digital culture. According to the *structuration theory* (developed by Anthony Giddens, 1984; and developed further by Ansgar Zerfass, 2008), the social structures should coordinate with one another, and all employees should be trained in social media since it affects all departments. The shared knowledge improves collaboration, employees involved in social media needing the help of lawyers, engineers, etc. and the latter requiring reliable information to be collected from social media (Nanci K. Carr, Steven P. Mayer, 2013).

Forty-five percent of active social media managers on Facebook think knowledge of the platform should be enhanced to improve its use and conversation management (Social Media Marketing Industry Report, 2015). In addition, companies, particularly professionals and those employees who converse on-line, need to set new strategies and behavior models for social media and blog in socio-technical entities, capable of reaching different audiences and serving a variety of purposes (Cornelius Puschmann and Rebecca Hagelmoser in Alexandra Georgakopoulou, Tereza Spilioti, Eds., 2016: 226-238). Thus, professionals must be credible, competent, capable of establishing equal and stable relationships of trust, while reducing risks to their company’s reputation (Andreas M. Kaplan, Michael, Haenlein, 2010; Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagin, 2015).

Apart from an adequate technical infrastructure, for employees to communicate effectively externally, a basic Code of Conduct (a Social Media Policy) needs to be adopted and correctly complied to by all those representing a companion the web. The code is based on legal principles and rules, aimed at maintaining privacy (particularly concerning confidential information about the company and its stakeholders), and at safeguarding the company’s reputation, while avoiding improper behavior by individuals. However, here, too, the situation is far from homogenous, with different companies adopting different practices. For instance, some companies even prohibit its employees to surf the Web and communicate in social media during working hours, to avoid workers being distracted, and to prevent "communication errors" (@ISACA, Information Systems Audit and Control Association, 2010: vol .1). Other companies allow employees to use the Web, but provide very strict indications, and tightly control employee behavior. Such companies acknowledge that a greater involvement of employees promotes more creativity, innovation and experimentation, benefiting the business. Conversely, though, the rules and prohibitions create dissatisfaction and lack of attachment to the workplace (Jackie Marfleet, 2008). The few existing open companies use employees as spokespersons to express their own values in real or virtual environments, so creating a sense of belonging, improving performance, increasing shared tacit knowledge, and strengthening social and relational capital. Tensions can arise, though, due to competition among employees, potentially hindering knowledge sharing (Ann Majchrzak et al., 2013).

Codes of conduct may be imposed from above. Alternatively, where different communicative needs exist due to a variety of user communities, codes may be written collectively by different departments and units, which pool their varying knowledge and

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experiences on the social network, subject to continual evolution (Jim Macnamara, Ansgar Zerfass, A., 2012; Michel Laroche et al., 2012). According to the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (Nora G. Barnes, Eric Mattson, 2009), companies that use codes make up just one third in the US, and likewise in Europe.

Given the variety of organizational models and the diversification in their application, this paper reports the results of an analysis of the related literature, to understand which models are applied by the most established companies on web 2.0, and assess how far employees are considered an important strategic resource for social network engagement, and used to strengthen a company's reputation in web sites.

1. METHODOLOGY

To assess the use of decentralized models and employees as company spokespersons, research centred on companies with the best online reputation and values representing best workplaces. This first required the identification of best practices, by selecting the companies active on social media over a length of time, and presenting stable standards of credibility and reputation. Secondly, to consider employees as reliable and effective company representatives, the most advanced working conditions needed to exist, with respect to education, professional training, career plans, and benefits, resulting in high motivation levels, loyalty and a sense of belonging (Barbara Mazza, 2014).

To select the companies, reference was made to the three most reliable world rankings - Great Place to Work, for working conditions, and Interbrand, as well as Reputation Institute, both used to assess company reputation on the web. As a further selection filter, the stable presence of companies in each ranking for at least three years (2013-2015) was considered, to ensure greater significance of positioning. Comparing the first 100 positions achieved in the last three years in the two reputational rankings (Interbrand5 and Reputation Institute6), 171 companies were identified, but only 35 of these were permanently present in both classifications. Of these 35, 7 showed significant losses in position, leaving 28 in the study.

5 The ranking “Best Global Brands”, produced by Interbrand (http://interbrand.com/best-brands/), makes use of the parameters of brand strength (ranging in price; the role of brand in the purchase decision; customer loyalty; ability to attract and motivate talent, positioning compared to competitors’ brands; analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the brand in terms of attractiveness) in addition to the economic and financial nature (transparent data on annual financial developments; returns in excess costs in the long term, at least 30 percent of revenue coming from an area other than that of the seat; significant presence in Asia, Europe and North America and broad geographic coverage in emerging markets; business impact of key stakeholder groups).

6 The ranking “Global RepTrack Results”, drawn up by the Reputation Institute (https://www.reputationinstitute.com/research/Global-RepTrak-100), measures the reputation of more than 7,000 companies operating in more than 25 industries and more than 50 countries in the world, through interviews with consumers, aimed at understanding the emotional connection to a brand, what generates trust, satisfaction and expectations. The surveyed dimensions are: quality of products/services, innovation level, conditions offered by the workplace, able to ethics, honesty and transparency of governance, citizenship (understood as attention to environmental issues and social responsibility towards society), value of leadership and financial performance, in terms of profit and economic growth prospects.
Tab. 1. The 28 multinational companies with the best reputation on the web

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adidas</th>
<th>FedEx</th>
<th>IKEA</th>
<th>Samsung Electronics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amazon.com</td>
<td>Ford</td>
<td>Johnson &amp; Johnson</td>
<td>The Coca Cola Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>Google</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
<td>The Walt Disney Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMW Group</td>
<td>Hewlett-Packard</td>
<td>Nestlé</td>
<td>Toyota</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canon</td>
<td>Honda Motor</td>
<td>Nike</td>
<td>UPS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisco Systems</td>
<td>IBM</td>
<td>Oracle</td>
<td>Volkswagen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danone</td>
<td>Intel</td>
<td>Panasonic - Formerly Matsushita Electric Industrial</td>
<td>3M</td>
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</table>

The 28 companies are a stable presence in both classifications in the three years under review.

Referring to the same three-year period, these 28 companies were then compared with those found in the ranking of Great Place to Work\(^7\), where the 25 best companies in the world for working conditions are indicated. Only six of those selected earlier (Cisco Systems, FedEx, Google, Johnson & Johnson, Microsoft and The Coca Cola Company) had high values for both their reputation and working conditions. Given the low number of cases detected, and to see whether there were differences between companies with better working conditions and those still investing online, the sample was increased. Though not present in the Great Place to Work ranking, 25 companies were identified as having a best online reputation, with 5 companies being high up in both of the rankings compiled. These 5 were added to the previous 6, so that a total of 11 multinational companies operating worldwide were taken for the study (tab.2).

The study is based on analysis of company documents (organization charts, corporate communication plans, plans for social media management, crisis and risk management plans, codes of ethics, codes of conduct, and integrated reports) published on the official sites. Specifically, we examined: the configuration of organizational structures; the communication management models in the social network, with particular attention to

\(^7\) The classification "Best World Companies", is produced by Great Place to Work (http://www.greatplacetowork.net/best-companies/worlds-best-multinationals) on the best workplaces in multinational companies in the world, already present in the Fortune 500 rankings: ranking the most accredited worldwide. The detection is performed on about 4 million employees in nearly 700 companies operating in 51 countries. Together, these companies employ more than 12 million employees worldwide. To be evaluated, companies must have already obtained positive results in two studies: the Trust Index Employee Survey which examines the corporate culture and the Culture Audit management questionnaire focusing on policies and company practices. In addition, the company must appear on at least five national lists that show the best working environments, have at least 5,000 employees worldwide and at least 40% (or 5,000 employees) of its workforce outside of your country of foundation. Extra points are awarded based on the number of countries in which a company operates, as well as on the basis of the percentage of the workforce of a company represented in the survey. The parameters include: knowledge sharing, fair treatment, evaluation of working conditions, access to thought leadership, levels of trust and sharing, presence of resources and equipment, physically secure environment, in care non working time, as well as aspects relating to the revenues, the share performance, governance, and superior customer service.
the activities of social media management and crisis management; the social media policy, consistent with the mission and corporate values; the role of employees, as well as offline and online testimonials.

Tab. 2. The 11 multinational companies selected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amazon.com</th>
<th>Fedex</th>
<th>Johnson &amp; Johnson</th>
<th>The Coca Cola Company</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apple</td>
<td>Google</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
<td>The Walt Disney Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisco Systems</td>
<td>Intel</td>
<td>Samsung Electronics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Interbrand, Reputation Institute, Great Place to Work (2013-2015).
Companies in bold are present in all three rankings, the others only in the first two.

For each document examined, information was selected in two ways: collection of extracts (reported in full) to extrapolate statements and explanations on issues under consideration. To better understand the organizational model, structural maps were drawn up. Secondly, keywords from the documents were extracted. In this way, the elements for analysis were identified and comparison made between the 11 companies.

Finally, to collect and categorize the information, the size of analysis, the concepts and the analysis parameters were identified, as follows:

Tab. 3 - The analysis parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Parameters</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company philosophy.</td>
<td>CEO statements, mission, vision and values on the corporate website.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal organization.</td>
<td>Analysis of operational and relational network.</td>
<td>Organization charts and articulation of the operating structures and the business units, the geographical location of the units, CEO statements of the adopted organizational models, presentations and documents for management with guidance on management methods, governance code intended to management, communications for prospective employees and talents on the management of their businesses, testimonies of employees reported on institutional sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resource management.</td>
<td>Detected the presence/absence of: training and professional development, customized career plans, paid benefits, active business webcommunity, projects for sharing ideas and for the testing of innovative proposals from below.</td>
<td>Policies, objectives and strategies traceable in integrated reports and corporate governance documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication management.</td>
<td>Analysis of the communication and marketing structures and the areas of social media management, as well as crisis and risk management and relationships between departments. Analysis of company strategies adopted and declared.</td>
<td>Documents of communication centers on corporate websites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media Policy.</td>
<td>Analysis of policies, rules and behavior to be adopted on social media and keywords analysis.</td>
<td>Clarification of guidelines, the corporate governance code, code of conduct, code of ethics, corporate social responsibility report, the sustainability report, integrated reporting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activism employee network.</td>
<td>Permissio/prohibition to be active; presence/absence in the network as the interface; actions that can make employees as testimonials and projects in which they are involved.</td>
<td>Official statements of the CEO and the management, documentation on social projects in which employees are involved.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The survey also aimed at identifying practices applicable to companies which, until now, have not yet experienced advanced decentralized organizational models, and at identifying possible risks and limitations experienced by enterprises. The methods here were also tested for the first time, in accordance with those already used by the research
group Altimeter in 2013. Hence, the effectiveness of the present tool was under assessment, as well.

3. RESULTS

The main results will be concisely presented, with the organization of the operating structures and online communication management being first reported, and then, the use of employees as corporate spokesperson, and the role models provided.

3.1 Structure Organization and Online Communication Management

The 11 companies examined can be considered state-of-the-art organizations in online communication management and staff involvement in external communication. Referring to the paradigm of integrated communication (Emanuele Invernizzi, 2000), good internal communication is a necessary prerequisite for good external communication (Eugenio Caruso, 2005). Therefore, representing the company entails the sharing of goals, targets, procedures and knowledge, by all, so encouraging employees to become aware and responsible, and to help increase business.

As stated above, to adapt to today’s socio-cultural changes and technology, companies need to adopt decentralized management models. The analysis confirms this since ten of the eleven companies studied (the one exception is discussed below) - have made this transformation, adopting management models characterized by collaboration, sharing and knowledge circulation.

The one company which goes against the trend is Apple, representing a form of ante litteram. It has always used a centralized model, the CEO making decisions, with employee teams being managed as "monads", without expected dialogue or confrontation. To protect the security of information, each team only knows what directly concerns it and is obliged to maintain confidentiality, even with regards to other groups in the company, creating a "silos effect" and hindering exchange of knowledge.

On the contrary, the other ten companies cultivate creativity and talent, actively listen to employees, and plan career paths and training of personnel. Coaching is provided (particularly in Google and Samsung), as is mentoring (especially in Cisco System where the employee can choose their mentor on the Intranet). Virtual working classes open to employees from different sectors are very common (for example, Samsung and Cisco Systems are active in social and internal forums), and there are learning centers that provide continuous training courses on topics related to different company needs, and to develop creative thinking. All companies activate a web community, whereby participants can (also spontaneously) exchange opinions, knowledge and problem solving together, to find quick answers, thanks to collaboration and complementary expertise, even overcoming problems of inclusion and cultural differences.

Employees operate in a form of "participatory centralization", typical of matrix structures, working in interacting teams, which overcome geographical and cultural boundaries. Referring to the Owyang model, 6 companies studied (Amazon.com, FedEx,

Some companies employing a Hubs & Spokes multiple structure also provide a control centre of management or special committees that decide procedures and supervise from headquarters (for example, Google and The Walt Disney Company), while still leaving teams (sometimes self-organized), to define the tasks, roles and functions. The other companies in this group (Amazon.com, FedEx, Microsoft, and The Coca Cola Company), have central connecting structures for specific functions (such as for communications and marketing departments), which establish objectives and guidelines, and then rely on the peripheral teams to manage their own procedures, consistent with the needs of the various countries in which they work.

In the companies with a holistic model, teams decide directly, and work in collaborative environments: established by Intel in 2000, Intelpedia is a wiki platform, a collaborative workplace for exchange and sharing; C-Lab and Mosaic are Samsung projects, the first allowing employees to propose innovative ideas, and the second, encouraging exchange of expertise, ideas and innovative solutions; and, Amazon, Johnson & Johnson, and the Coca Cola Company have virtual environments of participatory democracy to develop creative thinking. In holistic systems, employees interact online one-to-one, and involve bloggers and web influencers to increase engagement, and to gather user input and suggestions. In these companies, employees are used as testimonials.

Regarding the social media communication management, all the companies in question have specific communications and marketing structures in which central and local teams produce creative content to put on forums, blogs and social communities, inform, advise and support customers, realize online campaigns, sales and e-commerce, listen and monitor user engagement, and manage relationships with bloggers and influencers. In the most active cases (Amazon.com, Cisco Systems, FedEx and Samsung), the goal is to foster proactive users, engaging them through competitions of ideas, sharing of materials and development of social games. The Coca Cola Company, entrust the social media management mainly to partners and suppliers, but has set up a forum or think-tank among its customers - an "incubator" of shared ideas for the welfare of the company.

The social media area always works closely with the crisis area, in an integrated and cross-functional manner. The contingency plans are designed together in collaboration with other areas of the company. The goals are to simplify and harmonize procedures and strategies, optimize the work of human resources involved, share information, and ensure a unique, timely and safe response in an emergency. Samsung provides incentives for the setting up of cross-functional teams, whereby crisis units work with people from other departments of the company. Instead, Coca Cola recruit the best leaders of the various departments (around the world) to put them in the crisis unit.

The ten decentralized companies declared that the integration and cross-functionality increased effectiveness and allowed significant savings in marketing, with a 30 to 45%
saving being noted in the cases studied. Notably, 50% of crises are managed on the net by the Hub & Spoke Multiple companies, the percentage increasing with holistic companies, reaching 60% in Intel. In contrast, Apple opts to remain silent in moments of crisis, preferring to wait until a certain answer can be given, believing that by doing so, efficiency and credibility are ensured.

### 3.2 Representing the Company: Behavior Patterns and Social Media Policy

Based on the present evidence, the role of the departments is crucial in online conversation management. Dialogue with users and stakeholders is not a task that can be improvised or left to chance, since “interpretive distortions” set off rumors and hysteresis can be produced, leading to negative remarks being made about the company on-line, and so generating a vicious circle (Daniel Chieffi, 2011). Consequently, staff training and care in content creation are *sine que nons* for most companies. This being the case, why do academics, and more surprisingly, companies, still continue to hotly debate the issue of employee presence on the net, with no single policy being followed? This study aims to examine the choices of the companies under review and understand their motivations.

The analysis confirms a variety of perspectives: 4 companies (Amazon.com, Apple, Google, The Walt Disney Company) prefer to only be represented on-line by the staff of the communication departments, to ensure compliance with directives, pre-defined procedures and plans; 3 (FedEx, Intel and Microsoft) use hybrid solutions. The communication departments officially represent the company externally, but other employees represent the company when participating in initiatives of solidarity and corporate social responsibility off-line and, to a lesser extent, on-line. For example, Microsoft employees dedicate many work hours to activities related to nonprofit organizations and the FedEx employees support various social causes. Intel's staff, such as those of Microsoft, use social media to share stories and to promote discussion on company issues of interest, and to support and encourage user participation in competitions sponsored by the company. The three remaining companies (Cisco System, Johnson & Johnson, and Samsung) are the only ones which make full use of employees as online spokespersons, and provide them with the technological tools to converse. Cisco System declares that the presence of its staff on social media augmented engagement and loyalty, increasing the number of followers by 40%.

All companies examined provide specific online codes of conduct to employees (whether simple surfers or testimonials), the documents reflecting company social media policies, reiterating the basic philosophy principles, values, mission and corporate vision, and also including indications laid down by codes of ethics, codes of social responsibility and those given in business/or integrated reports. According to a report by the International Labour Organization in 2011, some of the companies in the present study (Amazon.com, Apple, Google, Intel and Microsoft) are among those with the best codes of conduct. However, the study shows that the other companies under analysis have equally high standards of conduct.

The codes of conduct are in line with governmental regulations concerning transparency, privacy and confidentiality, security, respect for others, and give specific
guidance for online conversation management. The indications can be summarized as following:

- For transparency, employees must declare their role in the company. When they change role or work, their profile on the social media must be promptly updated. Communication must be truthful, accurate, objective and, therefore, must stick to the facts. For example, Intel suggests only speaking of what is known and mastered;
- Confidentiality and privacy is required, as is copyright protection of trademarks, to respect the copyright and intellectual property, safeguard confidential information and trade secrets. Intel specifies that no information should be divulged concerning legal disputes, unpublished financial data, and products not yet launched;
- Security means, on the one hand, ensuring the protection of computer data of the company, users, partners and stakeholders, and on the other, not using available information for illegal purposes and/or to one’s advantage, as specified by Johnson & Johnson;
- Respecting others is a fundamental requirement, involving integrity and morality, communication styles devoid of any offensive, discriminatory, threatening, or obscene tones, and, naturally, avoidance of any harassment in any form (stalking, mobbing, etc.);
- Further indications suggest: being explicit when one’s opinions and those of the company differ; immediately declaring personal or business interests on a subject discussed; posting content that stimulates participation and answers to discussions; citing people (users and colleagues) who have already dealt with the same topic to facilitate sharing; avoiding being unfair to the competition, and providing misleading information; keeping calm and not assuming an aggressive attitude, but always being respectful, admitting mistakes; advising a change of mind has occurred, or a position reviewed on an issue; and declaring when published content has been edited.

4. DISCUSSION

To be on-line is a company’s absolute necessity, as indicated by data provided by the latest Digital Social & Mobile Report in 2015, with 53% of the world population being digitized, 42% making active use of the Internet and 29% of social media (with Facebook as the clear absolute leader). There has been a constant increase in the last few years (respectively + 1.6%, + 21%, + 12%), with North America being the dominant area of use (50% of the population uses social), followed by South America (48%), Europe (46%), Oceania (45%) and East Asia (43%).

Given this reality, it is no wonder that companies chase users on-line in virtual environments, and that the most active are North American (as much as 52% of the total, according to the Social Media Marketing Industry Report, 2015). Notably, apart from the Korean Samsung, all the other companies selected on the main rankings are from the US. Furthermore, according to the seventh report on the Social Media Marketing, 84% of businesses make an integrated use of social media to achieve a differentiated public, the platforms most used being Facebook (93%), Twitter (79%) and Linkedin (71%), followed by Google+ (56%), YouTube (55%), Pinterest (45%), Instagram
(35%) and then by the other companies. Our research gave a very similar distribution - Facebook (100%), Twitter (91%) and LinkedIn (64%), followed by YouTube (55%), Google+ (27%), Instagram (27%), Pinterest (18%), and other companies.

According to the world report, the main benefits are: increase of visibility (90%), transportation (77%) and the number of contacts generated (65%), loyalty of the fans (69%), market opportunities (68%), and business partnerships (55%). B2C conversations (51%) are more widespread than B2B (36%) and large companies with more than 1,000 employees (50%) are more active, compared to medium-sized (33%) and professionals (17%). In our study involving only large companies, the findings were similar: visibility (95%), accessibility (92%), generated contacts (60%), loyalty (60%) and market opportunities (55%).

In conclusion, this study confirms the widespread adoption of decentralized organizational models, Hub & Spoke multiple and holistic system in particular, taken as more conducive to creating a relational network that promotes the internal/external dialogue and increases the company's market competitiveness. The trend is to transform organizations from societies to communities, to use the traditional distinction made by Ferdinand Tönnies (1887 Trad. En. 1963). Businesses are no longer just producing organisms regulated by norms and beliefs, but the fulcrum of a system in which people exchange information and cultivate friendships, well beyond instrumental needs, to spread a sense of belonging and well-being to all, from stakeholders, employees to customers. Not surprisingly, the most currently adopted models are customer-centered, and the motor is the creation of value (Lauren Labrecque et al., 2013; Kim Hoh et al., 2015).

In this so clearly and well defined scenario, why has Apple chosen to pursue such a different path? Is, for example, the "slow" response to crisis, only a result of a thought-out strategy, consistent with its centralized organizational model, or has it also to do with existing poor dissemination of knowledge and integration between teams? This model means shared activities and crisis prevention cannot be planned collectively, with a subsequent total reliance on decisions being made by the CEO at the last minute. On the other hand, it is worth pointing out that Apple’s sales are second only to Samsung (IDC, International Data Corporation, 2016), and the choices made by the company have achieved a high reputation on the web, Apple holding first place in the Interbrand ranking over the last three years, and a positive trend rate of growth (from 12th to 8th place) in the ranking of Reputation Institute.

The question of company employee activity on the web is worth bearing in mind, particularly in view of future research as it represents an important subject sociologically, involving the relationship between public and private spheres (Derrick De Kerkhove, Antonio Tursi, 2006). In reality and possible even more subtly on the web, the two spheres inevitably intertwine whenever an employee (as a simple user, as well) converses in an open platform.

None of the company studied prohibit employees to surf the net, though exceptionally, Apple strongly discourages the practice. It does not allow the use of company equipment, defines very strict rules, and foresees punishment, up to dismissal for
offenders. Most of the other companies, instead, require a clear boundary between positions which are official and those which are individual. In difficult or problematic situations, employees must follow a pre-defined set of rules of behavior to help extricate themselves, and are not seen as representing the company. The holistic companies involve all their staff in network conversations, and though seemingly risky, the practice is so widespread as to appear inevitable, and so is actively facilitated: the companies give appropriate training, rules, and sharing, and an individual "common sense" comes from a strong sense of corporate identity, the employee being fully aware of the company’s objectives and principles. Companies also considerably invest in creating the best workplace in which employees feel "at home" and, above all, feel part of a community to support, sustain, promote and enhance in any form and in any manner. This approach is far from widespread, though in the long-term, it appears the most suited to promote business, while at the same time, satisfying the human innate need to converse with fellow human beings in all “worlds” possible, to look for "people like me."

As can be monitored over time, more companies are likely to adopt a more community approach, as the culture of “adaptivity” spreads, on a par with the evolution of organizational models of on-line communication management. This study is just a first starting point for longitudinal observations on these issues.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES


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