

CEOs & TWITTER – ARE YOU HANDING THEM THE KEYS TO THEIR OWN DEMISE?!

With Elon Musk's recent libellous Twitter rant about one of the Thai cave rescue divers and his subsequent sort-of apology, we ask - should you encourage your CEO to tweet?

Brash, publicity-seeking entrepreneurs aside, charity CEOs and their ilk are all over Twitter trying to secure attention and money for their causes. But only 15 Chief Executives in the FTSE10 have joined them.

No doubt many corporate CEOs believe that they have better things to do with their time than tweet (although Donald Trump manages both to tweet and run a country – after a fashion). Maybe they share the misgivings of American advertising guru, Bob Hoffman (a great blogger writing under the moniker 'The Ad Contrarian'), who regards Twitter as 'a means for the narcissistic to keep in touch with the feckless'.

There are many good reasons for Chief Executives not to be on Twitter. It may be inappropriate or ineffective for particular brands or for individuals who are neither tech-savvy nor great communicators nor want the attention. CEOs may see it as another opportunity to limit their careers if they cock- up; others may just be dismissive of its usefulness.

And Twitter is a minority interest. Around 25% of UK adults have a Twitter account (about 13 million people) - although how many actually use it regularly we do not know. Depressingly, the most retweeted post in the UK in 2017 was an American man's plea for retweets so that Wendys would give him free chicken nuggets for a year.

That said, 13 million people is way more than read national newspapers or watch BBC news. And thinking back to Donald Trump for a moment - while only 30% of American adults are on Twitter, how come everyone seems to know what he's tweeting? The answer is that the tweets are amplified by traditional print and broadcast journalists (according to the Pew Research Centre 96% of them are on Twitter – and aren't they a key stakeholder for you?).

The ability of social media to aggregate and amplify opinion should not be underestimated – nor the mainstream media's ability and willingness to magnify

it again and to use it as a source for stories and comment (for good and bad). Do you want or need to be part of that?

Of all the reasons to keep your CEO off Twitter, fear should not be one of them. Just be clear about your objective for being there, follow the rules - and pause before you post!

So what are the positive reasons for a CEO to tweet?

It allows you to set a personal narrative

People are curious about the world of the CEO – both in business terms and about them as a person. They want to know 'who you are' – your personality, beliefs and values. These are things that humanise companies and leadership. Which does not mean that you have to share photos of your family life. You can share passions and your hobbies (which are great connectors) and the things about leadership that make you tick. The most engaging CEOs on Twitter blend personal interests alongside a commentary of what is going on within their business.

It reinforces your business narrative

While business has lost some of its authority of late, the opinions of CEOs are still valued on their sector, markets, public policy and news. You may want to be politically impartial but you can stimulate debate, offer a business perspective on issues and trends and retweet meaningful and broader-appeal articles and innovation in your field of expertise or of leadership. Having a CEO active on social media is an extension of the brand but do keep brand messages subtle. Your followers are probably not doing so to read your company's latest press release - but they may be interested in the story behind the press release.

And you can take a leaf out of Pret-a-manger CEO Clive Schlee's book when he asked on Twitter for ideas on how to increase people's use of recyclable coffee cups – and then acted on what was suggested. You can say 'thank you' to staff, partners and stakeholders or respond to customer concerns. Seeing a CEO reply or follow you (as a customer or employee) is not just gratifying for the recipient but heightens loyalty. Who wouldn't want to

say they interacted with or were heard out by a Chief Executive - even virtually? You can even consider developing engaging tweet conversations with your peers which can make for compelling insight into business.

How should a CEO tweet?

Be human, be honest, be transparent, be authentic. Be prepared to listen and respond. Read the reactions to the content you generate and comment back. Handle problems with genuine care and concern.

It does not have to be a daily chore. Some CEOs tweet often (Elon Musk is up to 6,000 tweets since 2009, Richard Branson has 21,000 since 2007), some more rarely (as of July 2018, Apple's Tim Cook has tweeted only 576 times but each garners thousands of likes and retweets per tweet (quality engagement!). It is interesting to note that many entrepreneurs and high-profile leaders like Tim Cook, Bill Gates and Richard Branson have more followers than do their company accounts.

Who should Tweet?

Purists would say that every tweet from the CEO should be their own. If posting is an occasional thing then absolutely but many CEOs have PR people to craft some of their posts. Just beware of inconsistency of tone or content and be aware that there is a danger that audiences could pick up on it and see it as inauthentic. If using a team to tweet, then they need to have a strong understanding of the story that the Chief Executive wants to tell.

And finally ...

If you happen to work with a CEO who enjoys maintaining a social media presence and knows what they're doing, great. If your CEO is not in the least bit interested, then so be it. Chances are, your company will be no worse off - and neither will your CEO.

At Electric Airwaves, we serve the needs of Communications teams who need their spokespeople to communicate confidently and effectively. We train them what to say and how to say it.

To enquire about booking a media training session, call us on +44 (0)20 7323 2770 or email team@electricairwaves.com.