



The road to digital leadership

IN A SURPRISINGLY ROBUST METAPHOR, HAVING content go viral has been described as “winning the internet version of the lottery.” Your chances of success are infinitesimal and determined almost entirely by luck. And the big payoff seldom lasts very long – studies have found that viral content has a negligible impact on a company’s long-term social engagement.

There are many euphemisms for “going viral” – breaking through, making a splash – but whatever the phrasing, all miss the mark that leaders should be aiming for when they post online. It’s not about reaching the largest audience; it’s about reaching the *right* audience.

Of course time-strapped leaders want their online posts to reach as many people as possible, but the content most business leaders have to share isn’t meant to go viral. Posting regularly to one, perhaps two, social channels sounds a lot less exciting than reaching millions of people instantaneously, but this patient, long-term approach is the right one

For CEOs on social media, consistency and authenticity carry the day, say Facebook’s

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for senior executives. It cuts to the heart of what it means to lead: consistently connecting with people and inspiring them, building credibility and trust rather than trying to grab headlines or attention.

Imagine, for a moment, two relatively new business executives, both of whom face an emerging crisis. A high-profile, critically important moment for each; thousands will be introduced to these leaders for the first time. As they look to steady the ship and address concerned stakeholders, both will rely on digital channels to communicate their messages instantly and without any filters.

One executive has a track record of online posts, ranging from serious thought leadership to content revealing their career journey, values and interests. The other has posted infrequently, with content that’s clearly been written and produced by advisers. It’s obvious which leader is better practiced in delivering their message, better positioned to make sure that they are heard – and, crucially, which one is more likely to be believed.

FACEBOOK BY THE NUMBERS: Over 70 MILLION businesses use Facebook Pages on a monthly basis

And yet data suggests that many leaders have an online presence that more closely resembles the disadvantaged executive. Research published in 2017 by the PR firm Weber Shandwick found that half of CEOs of public companies and 59 percent of CEOs leading private companies had some sort of presence on social networks, but few were socially engaged and active. For both public and private companies, only 38 percent had posted once on a social network over a 12-month span.

This is an area in which even the most highly regarded CEOs have struggled. In 2016, DDI, a global human resources consultancy, analyzed how socially engaged the *Harvard Business Review's* "Top 100 CEOs" were. With fairly lax criteria – simply having a profile photo and multiple engagements on one social platform – only 20 percent of CEOs made the "socially engaged" cut.

But if only a fraction of *HBR's* best-performing CEOs are active on social media, is it really worth the time and effort it requires? According to author Alexandra Samuel, the answer is an emphatic yes. For starters, it takes less time to post and caption a photo than it does to respond to an email. And Samuel argued in a *Wall Street Journal* column that "CEOs who don't use Facebook are like CEOs who don't watch TV: They've fallen into CEO World, that parallel dimension where leaders are disconnected from the way most people live, shop and connect."

It's Samuel's last point – connecting and engaging with customers and employees where they are – that holds immense potential for leaders. Leaders' pride in their companies empowers employee advocates to amplify that message. It also allows leaders to highlight social causes that are important to them or their company, and to speak directly to customers. And choosing to be on social media signals leaders are transparent and open to candid feedback. Nearly three out of four US respondents in Weber Shandwick's survey agreed that a company whose CEO uses social media is more trustworthy, while 76 percent of employees said they would prefer to work for a CEO who is visible on social media.

Facebook is nearing 2 billion monthly active users; Instagram has more than 700 million and Twitter 300 million. LinkedIn doesn't publish its monthly active users, but does have 500 million members. It's not simply there are a lot of people on social media – with more joining each day – it's that social media is increasingly where these people find their news about companies and leaders.

76
PERCENT of employees say they would rather work for a social CEO

Source: Weber Shandwick

Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, surpassed **700** MILLION users in April 2017

According to research by the nonprofit news organization Grist, it's not just Millennials who are ditching newspapers in favor of their newsfeeds. "Facebook was the social network where senior executives were most likely to engage with business content." Karen North, the director of the digital social media program at the University of Southern California, explained this trend in a 2016 interview: "People are now just assuming relevant information will come to them. If it doesn't, it probably wasn't worth listening to anyway."

Some leaders are taking note. Spencer Rascoff, the digitally savvy CEO of Zillow Group, the publicly traded online real estate platform, said in a 2017 Facebook Live that he is active on social media because "I want to be where the conversation is happening, where people are talking about our company, our brand, our services, or our category." Rascoff shared in that same Facebook Live that he had engaged personally with 90 percent of new employees on social media *before* they'd joined the company.

Rascoff predicted that social media will soon be a non-negotiable for those in the C-suite. "CEOs and other executives who are not on social media – they will be," Rascoff said.

So how, exactly, can a leader begin to follow in Rascoff's footsteps?

Pick a channel Trying to establish a presence on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter all at once is likely to be overwhelming. Select one, maybe two, based on who you want to reach and how you want to reach them. Doug McMillon, CEO of Walmart, started posting on Instagram in 2015. He joined Facebook a year later, and posts primarily brief videos or photos with short captions. He doesn't have a presence on Twitter or LinkedIn.

Take it seriously Be clear about who you are, who you are talking to, the tone of your message and what you want to say. In other words, have a strategy in place. And then invest in a team that can deliver on that strategy. It takes time, resources and people to plan, create and share content, respond to any comments or questions, and determine what sort of content to share – a live video versus a photo, for example – and on what schedule. And executives themselves need training and repetition to master digital communications. Leaders get media training before their first radio, print, TV interview – why should the standards be any lower when communicating with larger audiences on social

media? "It's not a game for me," said John Legere, CEO of T-Mobile US, in a 2016 interview about his use of Facebook. "It's a very serious, highly leveraged part of the way I run my company."

But not too seriously Bill Gates posted on Facebook celebrating his wife Melinda's birthday. Richard Branson posted a photo of his bruised, bleeding face after taking a spill on a bicycle. Meg Whitman, CEO of HP, posted a photo of the simple cubicle at which she works. All were among their most-liked and most-shared posts that year. People enjoy seeing that leaders are humans, too. People want to know who leaders are before they'll listen and trust what they say.

Stick with it Assuming a fairly regular cadence of publishing, the longer leaders have a presence on social media, the larger their audience size, reach and engagement tends to be. In other words, a consistent approach sees a greater return on investment over time, as each post helps build – and engage with – a growing audience. Patience does pay off.

Measure, adjust, repeat No strategy worth its salt can exist without a way to measure its effectiveness. Most social channels provide some kind of dashboard that tells you who's looking at your

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content and how it's being shared. Take advantage of it and adjust. In some research, video posts by leaders were found to be shared twice as much as posts containing just a photo, and generated three times as many comments, on average. Complement this with other metrics as well – internal surveys, panel responses, message testing.

For all the benefits having a social media presence can deliver, it does bear some risk. Criticism and customer complaints are largely inevitable, though the people most likely to see and engage with your content tend to be fans and followers – people who have chosen to follow you in the first place. Most social channels also offer moderation tools to block offensive language or derogatory terms.

It has been said often – especially by leaders – that trust is in short supply today. For all the research and data about audience size and social engagement, at their core, social networks are simply an efficient way for business leaders to be more transparent and earn the trust of those whom they're leading, one post at a time.

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A SMARTPHONE OR "YELLOW NOTEPAD"? WALMART CEO, DOUG MCMILLON

SAM WALTON, FOUNDER OF THE retail giant Walmart, was known for dedicating large chunks of his schedule to visit stores and warehouses across the US. Donning a baseball cap and carrying a yellow legal notepad, Walton would meet with his employees and managers.

Today the company operates across 28 countries and employs 2.3 million people – making the company the third-largest employer in the world, according to *Forbes*. Doug McMillon, CEO since 2014, has looked to follow Walton's example by visiting stores and employees around the world (though he has traded in the baseball hat for an open-collared suit). To connect with such a large, dispersed workforce, McMillon has also turned to social media.

McMillon's pages on Facebook and Instagram now have hundreds of posts, many of them simple photos of McMillon with employees and customers he meets on the road, taken with his mobile phone.



McMillon with employee Lissa Zajac, in a photo he posted on Instagram in 2016.

In October 2016, for example, McMillon posted on his Instagram account the story of Lissa Zajac, an employee in the US whose house had caught fire. In the days after the fire, Zajac's colleagues had raised money, the company's "Associates in Critical Need Trust" fund had provided support, and the employee had been recently promoted. "I'm really proud of Lissa for her perseverance," McMillon wrote in the caption. "And I'm

proud of our associates for coming through to help her in a time of critical need."

Sprinkled in among McMillon's posts are also business updates – a video about Walmart's environmental initiatives, for example – and some light-hearted posts. In 2016, McMillon shared what his earliest jobs had been: a list that included radio DJ, "fry guy at Burger King" and painting houses.

McMillon's social media engagements are far from a one-man effort. A team reads every comment, responds to questions and routes complaints to relevant departments.

And though McMillon's posts weren't designed to go viral, they did end up reaching millions – the company used images from McMillon's Instagram account in TV commercials broadcast across the US.

"Social media is Doug McMillon's yellow notepad," wrote Dan Bartlett, Executive Vice President of Corporate Affairs for Walmart. "Our notepad may look different today, but what it represents will never change."

The number of business leaders active on Facebook **TRIPLED IN 2016 FROM 2015** 👍 The most

common age demographic on Facebook is **25 to 34**, accounting for roughly **30 PERCENT** of all users