

WHOSE TWEET IS IT ANYWAY?

When corporate
and personal
brands collide

#CerebralInsights

WHY WE WROTE THIS PAPER

Everyone is a **BRAND™**. By everyone, we mean everyone who has a public profile on a social network. Whether they know it or not, their collection of online activities make up their brand. We normally associate the concept of 'brand' to a business or organisation of some kind, but the digitally connected citizens of the 21st century are using all the tools at their disposal to build personal brands and this can cause problems for the companies that employ them.

A rapidly growing number of digitally connected citizens are deliberately and strategically using the tools available to them to build their own personal brands. From blogs to Twitter and Instagram, individuals can become recognised 'brands' in their own right, building extensive communities and followings. It is a brilliant use of the tools available, but it might not sit that well with the company that pays their salary.

As a business that helps companies navigate the challenges and opportunities of the social era of business, Cerebra has been witness to this increasing drive towards personal branding and how this trend fits within the business environment.

Companies are facing a growing number of questions around this topic, from figuring out how to make it work for them, to understanding and defining the 'rules' and ultimately, to defining control and ownership. It is an incredibly heated but critical issue that must be addressed.

In this paper we discuss the Industrial Age legacy of how businesses build and control their brand, the startling reality of the Information Age employee who build and control their own personal brands, and how these two forces impact each other.

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CHAPTER 1

INDUSTRIAL AGE MEETS INFORMATION AGE

How companies have historically handled the issue, and which management principles – if any – will remain relevant going forward.

With some exceptions, most notably in the online / web sectors, companies now find themselves caught between traditional, Industrial Age corporate practices and the groundswell of Information Age trends.

Younger workers are agitating for modern, open plan office spaces, collaborative sharing environments and Wi-Fi connected iPads from which to work. They want to be mobile and always connected. The Information Age employee flows seamlessly between an online and offline world where everything is digital, 'in the cloud' and shared. It's how they live and it's how they expect to be able to deliver professional services within their jobs.

The problem is that Industrial Age businesses have not been built this way. They were built to house cubicles and landline phones to enable production-line type employees who value dental plans over Internet access.

Corporate communication used to be stringently controlled - with a carefully selected and trained spokesperson reading out cryptically worded press releases that were checked in triplicate and thrashed down to saying nothing by the legal team. Now, with a brief blog post, or well-worded tweet, any employee can instantly become a brand ambassador, or brand detractor.

In this new, incredibly porous and fast-moving communications landscape, it isn't viable for companies to apply their old policies and procedures in an environment in which they have hundreds or even thousands of potential spokespeople as opposed to a handful. Information Age customers expect brands to be human, to have feelings and behave accordingly. They expect a lot of businesses, especially ones that were built in a time when customers and employees never had the means to speak so publicly.

FROM PRODUCT LINE TO INTERNET PHENOMENON

Prior to the late 1990s and early 2000s, companies generally had very little to worry about when it came to employees and their personal brands. For the simple reason that personal branding, outside of Hollywood, pop music and professional sports, was a foreign concept.

Employees were expected to buy wholeheartedly into their company's image and values, and to remain relatively anonymous. Although manned assembly lines were on the decline as automation took over, the psychology of, 'you're just a cog in a monstrous machine' was alive and well. This expectation of anonymity and conformity transferred over into communications policies.

When staff did speak or publish information on behalf of their employer, as an officially appointed spokesperson or member of the communications team, messages would be carefully scripted and only released after having gone through several hawk-eyed gatekeepers.

In the late 1990s, however, articles such as Fast Company's 'The Brand Called You' written by Tom Peters triggered a new movement that encouraged people to define themselves outside of their companies, forging a unique identity that would propel them along exciting and fast-moving career paths.

"Regardless of age, regardless of position, regardless of the business we happen to be in, all of us need to understand the importance of branding," wrote Peters. "We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You."

While the concept gained attention, and many aspired to build their own glittering personal brands, it remained a heady and unattainable goal for the majority of regular company employees. Many simply had no idea how to do it, and there were few role models to emulate.

Enter the explosion of the Internet. With large online audiences now instantly available to them via quickly growing mediums such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, not to mention the millions of blogs and microblogs, forums and message boards, employees aspiring to build personal brands now have the ultimate toolbox at their fingertips.

As these online platforms and social media networks have grown exponentially, so too have the number of ambitious digital adopters who have distinguished themselves as thought leaders, trendsetters and Internet 'celebs' – most often to the benefit of their employers. Particularly in cases where these online influencers hold high-ranking positions within a company, the company enjoys free exposure and potential access to a raft of new customers.

However, providing employees with unfettered access to online platforms and social media networks, essentially handing them virtual speakerphones, doesn't always result in great marketing. Quite the opposite, in fact. The list of social media snafus causing irreparable damage to companies is now infinitely long.

The challenge that companies face, therefore, is how to balance a growing desire and ability among employees to use online tools to express themselves and build personal brands, with the Industrial Age need to control brand messages and protect the company's image and values.

Instead of issuing a blanket ban on social media at work and restricting access (a move that will surely alienate employers from the best and brightest candidates) companies should perhaps look at adapting some of their traditional, Industrial Age practices to the new, Internet-fueled corporate communications environment.

For example, in the way that spokespeople and communications teams were carefully groomed and schooled on how to deal with the media, new employees and knowledge workers should receive compulsory training on how to conduct themselves on social media platforms. Such training would provide much needed guidance on how to draw the line between personal and professional use, and when certain comments or conversations can be deemed harmful to the company. This would not only protect companies, but would help employees to avoid landing themselves in legal hot water.

Social media training has already become integral to the employee induction process at large multinationals such as Dell, PepsiCo, Adidas and HP. Instead of viewing social media and its ability to elevate employees as a threat, forward-thinking companies view it as an opportunity, provided that employees receive formal training and specific guidelines on how to use the medium appropriately, and manage the development of their personal brands while remaining aligned to the company brand.



CHAPTER 2

MEET JOE BLOG

Who is the Information Age employee? What drives them, and how do modern organisations need to adapt to meet the new reality that they represent?

Within the corporate environment, there is an unmistakable changing of the guard taking place. Young, ambitious and tech-savvy upstarts are disrupting the status quo, insisting on access to social media platforms on which they can pontificate, ponder and unashamedly self-promote. They are keenly aware of the value of cultivating large online followings, and indeed, the value of developing a recognisable personal brand.

Unlike their older, more conservative colleagues, they believe in a culture of collaboration and constant sharing, drawing on the power of the crowd as opposed to the power of one. They believe that businesses should do good and stand for things. They contribute knowledge to public resources like Wikipedia and cash to cool ideas on Kickstarter.com. They're intimately connected to the world through their phones, and most importantly, they understand that becoming a thought leader and online influencer equips them with an invaluable bargaining tool that can be used to benefit or harm their current employers.

For organisations to both manage the risks and magnify the opportunities that the Information Age presents, they need to have an in-depth understanding of the Information Age employee and how he/she will impact the company and its culture. Yet to truly comprehend how the Information Age employee will impact - and is impacting - the modern organisation, companies need to understand how these individuals communicate and collaborate outside of their job.

SO LET'S MEET JOE BLOG...

Joe has never known a world without mobile phones, MP3s, content on demand, instant and seamless connectivity to his vast social network, and an ever-present ethos of storytelling and sharing. Joe has conscientiously created social circles of 'known and trusted' and 'unknown but trusted anyway' influence around him, and he taps into these circles incredibly efficiently to make decisions, gather information and burnish his shiny personal brand. He is motivated by the prospect of new experiences from which he can derive meaning, discovering different ways of looking at things, and the opportunity to create cool stuff and change the world along the way. All with the help of his friends, both online and offline, of course.

Having established a significant and wide-reaching social graph, and having learned the delicate rules of social influence and the art of creating social currency, Joe expects to be able to access and leverage his network and online savvy at all times – especially at work. He demands that his physical workplace is reflective of his digital communities, and therefore characterised by a culture of collaboration, sharing, intimacy, humanity, openness, diversity and authenticity. He also cherishes his personal time, and the flexibility and freedom to be able to work when and where he wants, using the devices and mediums of his choice.

Typically, however, Joe arrives at a prospective employer to be presented with a cavernous cubicle, a closely monitored computer and mobile phone, and access to all of his beloved social channels and platforms blocked.

This is the classic Information Age employee meets Industrial Age employer scenario and there is no quicker way to repel some of the most dynamic and talented professionals from an organisation (many of which are in dire need of good people who are adept in the digital environment).

WHEN JOE BECOMES (SORT OF) FAMOUS...

After having invested a great deal of his private (and perhaps also professional) time in creating a unique and powerful personal brand, Joe has now armed himself with a potent bargaining tool. It is quite possible that his mega-popular online persona is disproportionately indicative of his actual experience or qualifications – but this doesn't negate the fact that his perceived social influence and online clout will be a significant variable in the recruitment equation throughout his career.

Indeed, within many organisations today, sub-standard employees are being retained because of their perceived online influence, while in others, relatively low-level workers are wielding formidable power and influence online without their employers being aware of it.

When employers discover Joe and his colleagues building their own expansive digital kingdoms (often on company time using company resources), they can choose to either leverage these digital 'assets' to the benefit of the enterprise, leave the employee to his own online exploits in good faith, or attempt to 'dethrone' him by restricting access to social networks and platforms or enforcing strict guidelines.

Increasingly, however, employees who have constructed a recognisable personal brand with a significant online following are perceived as highly proactive, skilled and powerful and are more often than not calling the shots at the corporate bargaining table.

In order to be able to recruit and retain top performing Information Age employees, organisations need to embrace a new, more dynamic and less controlled way of doing business, and a collaborative, community-driven corporate culture. At its core, this culture is defined by constant communication and sharing - both online and offline.

As more companies embrace this reality and accept Information Age employees and the trends they represent, understanding how to nurture the Joe Blogs of the world and harness their digital and social prowess will become a key differentiator in an increasingly cut-throat corporate environment.

If an employee has used an organisation's resources to build their personal brand does the organisation have any claim over their employee's personal brand?

CHAPTER 3 WHOSE TWEET IS IT ANYWAY?

There are a few different scenarios to consider here because every business is probably faced with many different scenarios all at the same time.

THE VARIOUS SCENARIOS ARE:

1. You have current employees who have social profiles that are relevant to the business e.g. you're a financial services business and you have one or more employees who are well known online for being financial service thought leaders.
2. You have current employees who have social profiles that are NOT relevant to the business e.g. you're a financial services business and you have an employee who has a fashion blog with a massive readership.
3. You have current employees who have no / limited social profiles.
4. You have prospective employees who are bringing established social profiles with them that are relevant to your business.
5. You have prospective employees who have social profiles that are NOT relevant to the business.
6. You have prospective employees who have no / limited social profiles.

If you were to speak to the average employee, they will tell you adamantly that they own their social profiles and the company they work for has no rights over it at all. There's very little legal precedence to contradict this belief. On the whole, an employee's Twitter account is their account.

However, as the importance of personal branding has increased, so has the use of company resources to build personal brands. At a very basic level, the most common resources used are time and access to intellectual property. Forward-thinking businesses invest in the advancement of their employees and many of those employees share their industry insights with their social communities. If those insights are valuable, their audiences will grow. This is generally a win-win for both the individual and the business.

But what happens when that IP and company time are together used for personal promotion? Let's say the employee uses company time to write insight pieces and publish on their own blog. It changes things for sure. The business is still benefiting but definitely not as much.

Questions will be asked about why the employee didn't write directly for the company blog, or for the media on behalf of the company. You should also be asking what happens when that employee's increased personal brand makes them a prime poaching target for your biggest competitor. They used your resources to build their personal brand and they can cash in on that.

Here's another scenario that clarifies why you need to think about this: your business lands a regular slot on a talk radio show. This is a great profiling opportunity but it does require a human to fulfill on the opportunity. You nominate a company spokesperson to do the show and when they arrive for the first show the producer says, "when we end the show we'll invite our listeners to contact you on Twitter, what's your Twitter username?"

Does the spokesperson give their personal username or their company's username? The answer is, most likely, that they'll give their personal username but that they should give their company's username because it's a company opportunity, not a personal one. When that radio show grows the spokesperson's personal following into the tens of thousands, does the company have any claim over that? The answer should lie in the employment contract and social media policy but that might not be enough— you should have had the discussion before hand to decide who gets profiled.

For each of the above 6 scenarios, there are examples like the one we've just listed. Below are some recent examples that highlight just how grey and confusing this whole space is:

PHONEDOG VS. KRAVITZ

In 2012, an American company, PhoneDog, sued ex-employee Noah Kravitz for changing his Twitter account handle and taking his followers with him when he quit. Kravitz tweeted on behalf of the company while employed.

The case has since been settled but at its core the legal battle was about who had the right to access a particular Twitter account and maintain the relationship with the Twitter followers associated with it. In

the lawsuit against Kravitz, according to a court ruling in the case, PhoneDog alleged that the password and compilation of subscribers in the Twitter account constituted “trade secrets,” and that Kravitz had inflicted damages to the company’s business through his unauthorized use of the account and “misappropriation of trade secrets.”

While it may be unclear whether anyone “owns” a Twitter account other than Twitter itself, PhoneDog claimed that it does have an ownership interest in the Twitter account and list of followers based on Twitter giving it license to use the account. PhoneDog argued that a list of Twitter followers is similar to a list of business customers. Others have argued that social media accounts like Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook are a form of intellectual property akin to proprietary business databases or customer records.

FIRST NATIONAL BANK

Michael Jordaan, the former CEO of First National Bank (FNB), has been credited with personally driving the evolution of FNB into what is now perceived to be one of the most innovative brands in the country. His social media profile and conduct has been lauded as one of the major reasons customers choose to bank with FNB. People describe him as “approachable”, “accessible”, “authentic”, “transparent” and “human”.

We have tracked Michael’s impact on his own organisation and the industry with keen interest, and when he announced his resignation the big question on our minds here at Cerebra was around the ownership of his Twitter account - the envy of competitors and contemporaries countrywide.

In an internal debate, half of Cerebra advocated for Michael, saying that it was his personal account and that FNB had no claim to it or ownership of it whatsoever. Valid point. The other half of Cerebra made a case that the account would not have grown so rapidly had Michael not been full-time employed CEO of FNB and that considering it now had a “readership” bigger and better than most business publications in South Africa, was a media asset the organisation would be reluctant to relinquish. Also a valid point.

Michael is not the only business personality with a brand as big or bigger than his (in Michael’s case, ex-) employer, and FNB is not the only corporation facing this interesting quandary, and yet very little thinking has been done as to what this means for companies and their new “celebrity” employees.

We don’t know if there was any internal discussion at FNB around this but we do know that Michael’s Twitter account, and all of the effort that FNB had put into profiling the account, walked out the door with him. Had FNB started a dedicated CEO account their new CEO could have walked in and taken it over, although you could argue that the authenticity, and as such the popularity, of the account was as a result of being Michael’s personal account.

SOUTH AFRICAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION

Media companies are particularly at risk to complications around personal branding. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), South Africa's national broadcaster, owns a broad range of media properties including a number of the most popular radio stations in the country, such as 5FM.

The 5FM DJs are, besides being known for their shows, also highly influential online. Each of them can use the airtime afforded to them as part of their jobs to promote their personal Twitter usernames (within reason). They do this primarily to integrate into their shows, allowing listeners to Tweet into the show and request music, ask questions, etc. The natural side effect of being allowed to promote their Twitter username to the station's listenership is that the DJs gain a massive following online.

The SABC does get the benefit of having an additional channel through which listeners can engage with the show, but they don't own or control that channel at all. In fact, as happened recently, when a rival station poaches a high-profile DJ, their massive Twitter following leaves with them. A national broadcaster whose business it is to own communication channels, doesn't have control or ownership of the rapidly growing social profiles of their radio DJs.

If you had to phone 5FM and ask if you could get your company's Twitter username read out every hour during a show, they would send you a quote, probably a sizeable one, yet they haven't come to grips with DJs freely promoting their personal brands on company airtime.

We're not sure how the SABC will address this in the future, but because the DJs own their communities, they're free to monetize that influence outside of their job with no requirement to share that revenue with the station.

SKY NEWS

Sky News is an example of a company that has come up with a solution to the issue of personal brands within their overarching corporate brand.

Every journalist at Sky has an assigned Twitter handle that belongs to Sky e.g. @JoeBlogSky. Sky News owns these Twitter handles, which, first and foremost, allows them to govern what content is shared on their employee's accounts. Secondly this approach allows Sky to own the audience captured by a particular journalist. For example, if Sky's star journalist with a hundred thousand followers were to resign they leave behind their amassed audience.

Sky is putting their brand first whilst leveraging their employee's personal brands. It is also interesting to note that because Sky own all their employees' Twitter handles, they are able to manage them to ensure that news is broken over broadcast first, and social media second.

This also gives Sky time to check if information is actually correct, but perhaps puts them on the back foot in terms of not being the first to break the news due to all news coming in through social media having to go through a lengthily editorial process.

We aren't saying that this is a route all businesses should take when it comes to personal brands, but we do commend Sky on taking the time to think the problem through— they have picked a route and they are sticking to it.

CEREBRA

It wouldn't be fair to discuss other companies and not share our own lessons. As a communication agency we are well aware of the impact of personal brands. Not only do we value prospective employees who have strong personal brands (as long as they're complimentary to ours), we also encourage our employees to promote themselves as we believe this positively impacts our corporate brand.

HOWEVER, WE DO HAVE SOME RULES THAT GOVERN THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE PERSONAL AND COMPANY BRAND:

1. If your personal brand is built around a topic related to our business, you're deemed to be a company spokesperson, even when using your personal profiles. As such, what you say online must complement the company's messages.
2. If your personal brand is not relative to the business, you're free to do your thing, as long as what you say doesn't negatively impact the business or our clients.
3. If you have a profiling opportunity that was created by the business, the profile of the business must come first and the individual second. If the profiling opportunity was created by the individual, their profile can come first and the business second.
4. Work comes first. Reasonably using company resources to build your brand is acceptable as long as it comes second to your job.
5. Anything you say and do, both online and offline, impacts on the business. Understand this and don't be stupid.

We regularly face new situations that require discussion and thought, but all we've faced to date are covered by these five rules.

CHAPTER 4

PRACTICAL STEPS TO AVOIDING CONFLICT

Guidelines to approaching the issue of personal brands within a business and making it work for both you and your employees.

On the whole, we support and promote the building of personal brands, even if it does make those employees attractive targets for our competitors. We would rather receive the benefits of having highly profiled and respected employees than keeping the brilliance of our people in the shadows. Their job is to be amazing and our job is to ensure Cerebra is the place they want to work.

Being a company that encourages a healthy symbiosis between personal and corporate brands, our guidelines to addressing this topic will naturally lean towards promoting personal brands over quashing them. Regardless of which way you lean, these steps are recommended.

STEP 1: KNOW YOUR LANDSCAPE

Before you form a judgement or make a decision, you need to understand the pros and cons of your employees building their personal brands. This could differ depending on your industry, your competitors, your employees and many other aspects. Don't just assume it to be either negative or positive. Spend time understanding information age employees and Industrial Age businesses. You will need to create balance between the two.

STEP 2: KNOW YOUR EMPLOYEES

Now you need to find out which of your employees have profiles outside of the immediate business. Whether they blog, tweet or write a column for a running magazine, you need to be aware of it. Often, especially in the social media space, employees run anonymous social accounts in their spare time. Unless they volunteer this information it's unlikely you'll figure it out, but still give them a chance to volunteer it.

STEP 3: ASSESS THE RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

When assessing the individual risks and opportunities, you can and should include the relevant employees in the discussion. Their opinions and insights will be invaluable in the assessment. It will also let them know that you're investigating things and that you're looking for it to be mutually beneficial. Part of this process will be to allocate the employees into one of the six categories we listed earlier. Your goal will be to develop guidelines for each of those.

STEP 4: DECIDE WHERE YOU STAND AND SET THE RULES

You have all the info, now it's time to decide where you stand and start developing the rules or guidelines. Assuming you support a symbiotic relationship, your rules will promote and protect both parties, persuade positive and dissuade negative behavior, and create an environment and opportunities for other people to become part of this. Try not to make the rules too complex - keep them simple and understandable and rather promote a culture of open discussion to iron out any specifics. These should then be written into your social media policy which all employees must sign. Try as hard as you can to keep the lawyers out of it unless your lawyers inherently understand online and social media. Lawyers tend to take a too conservative and limiting stance.

STEP 5: LIST SOME SCENARIOS TO SUPPORT THE RULES

It's easier to have broad examples than specific rules. Much like the example we listed earlier around a spokesperson getting a regular slot on a radio show, examples or stories are often much better at conveying intent than a specific rule. As time goes by and employees come to you discuss scenarios you'll be able to add new examples to your list of scenarios.

STEP 6: EDUCATE, TRAIN, EXPLAIN AND EDUCATE AGAIN

Whether you're for or against personal branding you should be educating and training your employees around the policies you've crafted - it's not enough that they simply sign the policy. The less your employees understand the rules the higher the chances of a brand disaster. They're already out there on social media building personal brands, whether they (or you) even know it. If they don't understand have their personal brand impacts the business they're likely to land themselves and the business in trouble. Assuming you're building a mutually beneficial environment, employees will be open to you educating them on how the business can assist them in building their personal brand, and how they can give back.

STEP 7: CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN BUSINESS AND EMPLOYEE

Beyond the personal branding issue, many other problems arise from the clash between Industrial Age businesses and Information Age employees and consumers. Aggressively investigate how to evolve other areas of your business towards the Information Age.

CONCLUSION

The subtleties of the relationship between employee and employer are vast and the rise of personal branding has added a new layer. This is not a threat, it's an opportunity for businesses to evolve into a place that attracts and retains the best employees. All businesses should be looking at how they can facilitate an environment where their employees can build both their personal and business brands in a way that benefits all. If you ignore the issue or panic and block everything then you'll be missing out on an incredible opportunity.

ABOUT CEREBRA

Cerebra was founded by Mike Stopforth (www.mikestopforth.com) in 2006. Since then, the integrated strategic communication agency has grown from a small consulting outfit to a large team of incredibly talented, hard-working personalities who all share in a passion for effective communication. It's this passion and our learnings, which we hoped to share with you in this guide.

We are in the business of aiding companies in building communities, engaging with these communities and finally activating these communities through the appropriate communication channels, whether traditional or social media.

For more visit www.cerebra.co.za

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