Scott Hirabayashi

ENMG 652

**“A Blogger in Their Midst” Case Study**

**Executive Summary**

Will Somerset is the CEO of Lancaster-Webb Medical Supply, a medical supply company. During a sales presentation to a major medical director, Will is confronted with the interruption of an excitement-generating, but volatile employee of the company, who is known as “Glove Girl”. Judy Chen, Lancaster-Webb’s communication chief, and Evan Jones, vice president of marketing, inform Will of the positives and negatives of Glove Girl’s recent impact on Lancaster-Webb, and its audience. Glove Girl, through her provocative blog, strong presentation skills, and savvy marketing skills (wearing memorable green surgical gloves), has revived demand for Lancaster-Webb’s older medical supply products. At the same time, Glove Girl has created problems by generating controversy around the company, and caused issues between Lancaster-Webb and Houston Clinic, a potential sales partner. Retaining Glove Girl comes with both potentially-high upside, and great risk for Lancaster-Webb.

**Challenges**

Glove Girl’s Increasing Impact on Lancaster-Webb: Glove Girl and her blog are drawing attention away from Lancaster-Webb’s regular marketing strategies. At a major industry conference, Lancaster-Webb expected to present major company information on a new product to a large crowd, including a “big sales prospect”. Instead, Will (representative of ‘regular’ company marketing), is left with a miniscule audience and is forced to shorten his ‘major’ presentation, losing a chance to draw interest in Lancaster-Webb’s new product line. Meanwhile, Glove Girl is drawing huge crowds, pulling conference attendees who would normally attend the Lancaster-Webb presentation into her own presentation room.

This is a growing change in power dynamic between regular marketing strategies and Glove Girl’s influence, where Glove Girl’s voice is becoming more important than the company’s. Worse, Judy Chen explains that Glove Girl is *gaining* attention and traction with her audience, and Evan Jones notes her benefits Lancaster-Webb by reaching a new customer base. With the tantalizing sales potential from the following that Glove Girl is growing, Glove Girl is becoming too valuable for Lancaster-Webb to release.

Accuracy of Information Issues with Glove Girl: Evan and Judy describe the numerous issues of information-sharing and possible information leaks that cause potential headaches within the company. Glove Girl has already noted possible issues in the work conditions of overseas Lancaster-Webb factories. Worse, Glove Girl’s recent questions have caused unnecessary stress between Lancaster-Webb and a major clinic and possible sales partner.

These claims shed a negative light on Lancaster-Webb, and raised the anger of Lancaster-Webb's sales partners. Furthermore, in both cases, Glove Girl’s claims in her blog posts were not based on complete information. While it is acknowledged that Glove Girl does retract the claims upon receiving more information about work conditions and business practices of Lancaster-Webb’s potential partners, *there is no guarantee that repeat issues will not happen* with disclosure of important information, or critical stances on the products and practices at Lancaster-Webb. The initial corporate headache created by these claims, compounded by negative lasting perceptions of her sales base, threatens partnerships and future relationships, as well as public perception of Lancaster-Webb themselves.

**Main Causes/Root Causes**

Management’s Lack of Knowledge on Glove Girl and Blogging: One of the main issues is the lack of knowledge shared by the company’s CEO, and to a lesser extent his executive team. Prior to her disruption at the major conference, Will appears to have had no knowledge of Glove Girl, social media blogging, or her growing force and effect on the company or its audience. Thus, a significant part of the problem is Lancaster-Webb’s lack of knowledge, which is leading to the unintentional allowance of its employees to share, promote, or question company actions and products. Had the executive team previously been knowledgeable about Glove Girl’s actions, they could have been addressed at a nascent stage, and either redirected into a sensible social media integration strategy, or terminated altogether. Instead, the company is confronted with a major issue that will affect their future.

Lack of Coherent Policies on Information Sharing: Lancaster-Webb lacks a coherent set of rules for sharing information on social media, evident by their lack of policy in dealing with Glove Girl. Lancaster-Webb is firstly lacking in knowledge of her controversial posts, and second, do not appear to have any policies at dealing with Glove Girl or her actions. Second, Lancaster-Webb is *not* enforcing policies for employees to distance their personal opinions from the company stance, and Glove Girl could be construed to share the opinion of Lancaster-Webb itself.

This is an issue because Glove Girl’s blog is intentionally a provocative source of information. It drives the conversation about Lancaster-Webb’s products by providing novel information, or counter-narratives to the regular Lancaster-Webb pitch. For Glove Girl’s content, this has meant her posting misinformation about both corporate practices and potential partners. As one potential client explains to Will, Glove Girl had previously raised red flags about a partnership with the client’s organization based on an incomplete understanding about their organization. She has shown a history of retracting mistakes in her information disclosure, but there is great danger in posting content intended to entertain. As Glove Girl serves as an informal speaker for Lancaster-Webb, this peddling of misinformation can come at great cost and liability (lost sales, deteriorating reputation, potential lawsuits) to the company. Most problematically, Lancaster-Webb employees like Glove Girl are not being encouraged to follow proper protocol in social media sharing, because Lancaster-Webb has no such policy.

Lack of Oversight on Information Sharing for Employees: Glove Girl is a vital example of how little management appears to be paying attention to the social media lives of its employees. There is confusion and concern about management repeatedly sharing a lack of knowledge on what this major blogger is posting on her website, but Glove Girl is also representative of a changing social media landscape. According to “Demographics of Social Media Users”, 72% of American adults use some form of social media, with 70% of users of the most popular social media apps using social media everyday. Social media is increasingly intertwined in employee’s lives, and lines are blurred between what is appropriate to share, and what is not. Lancaster-Webb’s lack of understanding and tracking of their employees in the social media landscape around them is problematic, as distinct and influential voices may emerge from other employees at Lancaster-Webb, without management’s knowledge.

**Recommendations:**

With the disruptive effect Glove Girl has on Lancaster-Webb, and its effect on both internal and external forces surrounding the company, Lancaster-Webb must make a concerted effort to educate themselves on the benefits and dangers of information sharing within his company. Subsequently, there are three recommendations as follows:

Survey employee’s social media usage: The information gap between executives and the actions of their employees on social media led to many of the issues. Management should look to survey their employees in order to learn about their social media usage, so that they can address potential problems in the future.

Create a social media policy for company employees: In order to proactively attack issues that arise from employee blogs and social media in cases like Glove Girl, Lancaster-Webb should make it their top priority to craft a coherent social media policy for employees. “More Social Media Workplaces”, an analysis of current policies, suggests that this document includes four major tenets, "Employees speak for themselves… Don't comment on confidential matters… Don't discuss competitors, and be courteous".

Moreover, drafting this policy further ensures termination of any employee as merited and legal, as was shown in a previous court case where an employee was terminated because of posting comments on Facebook that were detrimental to her employer and her coworkers (“Termination of Employee”, 2013). In that case, the social media policy was used as sufficient reason for her termination.

Create a department/team of employees to discuss and implement social media oversight: Because social media is constantly in-flux, Lancaster-Webb should encourage employee and management discussion of potential issues that have arisen from social media posting, and track incidents of accidental information disclosure, inappropriate revealing of company information, or any information posted that potentially breaks rules set in the social media policy.

For a large-scale organization, this may also be benefitted by the use of internal auditors, who specifically work to counter social media posts that go against company policies. Cain (2012), in an analysis of social media audits conducted by the U.N., found that the usage of internal auditors may be strong additions to these teams. “The U.N. auditors agree that their audit helped them look at the big picture of social media- governance, policies and procedures, and risks- rather than only focusing on technical issues.”

**Table of Recommendations**

| **Recommendation** | **Rationale** | **Description and Time-Frame** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1. **Survey Employees’ Social Media Usage** | Management should survey employees on their usage of social media within the company, in order to gauge potential issues to address with the social media policy. | * Management should craft and electronically administer a company-wide survey, to gain a better understanding of how widespread usage is. (within next 2 weeks) * Management should analyze the results in order to write their social media policy. (within two weeks after finishing company-wide survey) |
| 1. **Create a Social Media Policy for Company Employees**   With coordination between executives and employees, draft a coherent social media rules, regulations, and code of conduct plan that executives and employees will sign. | Employees need to know what activities are allowed on their personal blogs and public-facing social media, and executives should have documentation and consensus on social media policies that limit possibilities of information disclosure and corporate engagement to the public. | * 1-2 company-wide meetings held between executives and employees about issues with current social media policies: what should be acceptable, what is unacceptable, and consequences for each action (within 1 month) * Executive team drafts a social media policy that incorporates the feedback from the meetings (After second month) * Finalize draft of social media policy by eliciting feedback from company employees (After second month) * Company employees and executives sign policy (After 3 months) |
| 1. **Create a department/team of employees to discuss social media oversight**   The company should decide, based on size, if a team, committee, or department should be created in order to perform oversight on employees’ social media actions. | In order to stay knowledgeable about social media issues, executives and employees should understand and share concerns about the enforcement of social media policies, as well as new issues that new social media outlets can pose with changing technology. | * From the results of the survey, decide which type of committee or organizational group would best be appropriate (within 2 months after survey closes, aligning with completion of social media policy) * With participation from those present at discussions about social media policy, propose request for team of shared practitioners of proper social media usage (immediately after completion of social media policy creation and signing) |

**Summary:**

While Lancaster-Webb has initially escaped the loss of a major sale, and not yet confronted the blogging social media usage of an influential employee, there are many warning signs that should encourage them to immediately take action.

Glove Girl and her blog represent a fundamental change in information-sharing, and for Lancaster-Webb to solve their problems, a combination of knowledge, reflection, insight, and cohesive policies and communication serve as strong recommendations for dealing with future issues.

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