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Tactical Transparency

How Leaders Can Leverage Social Media to Maximize Value and Build Their Brand

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

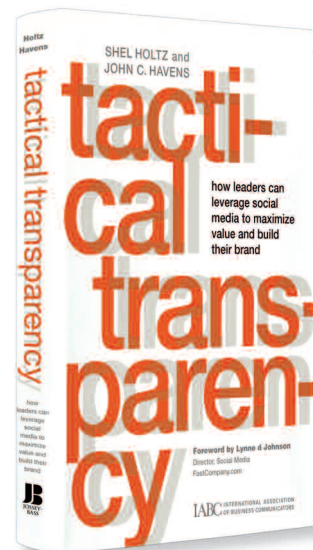
Organizations are under a microscope as never before. Thanks to the Internet and the growing use of high-speed connections, word of misdeeds and mistakes can spread to millions with unprecedented speed, causing untold damage to an organization's reputation and share price. No longer just a "nice-to-know" concept, transparency has become a state of mind for thousands of CEOs, managers, employees and customers around the globe.

Transparency is the degree to which an organization makes its leaders accessible, allows its employees to reinforce the public view of the company, shares its ethics and values, makes its culture visible, allows the results of its business practices both good and bad to be known, and makes its business strategy known to its investors.

Tactical Transparency provides a methodology that will help organizations create their own unique plans to bring greater authenticity to their companies and brands. Authors Shel Holtz and John C. Havens provide step-by-step details on how executives and professional communicators can create a transparency strategy that will keep their organizations competitive in the 21st century. They explain how organizations can evaluate their readiness for transparency, what they need to do to get ready, and how to effectively communicate their transparency strategy to their customers and employees.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to change your traditional sales techniques and embrace the idea of relationship-oriented marketing techniques.
- That engaging in conversation with consumers is a must in today's ever-changing communication environment.
- That the new conference model is the "unconference," where much of the formality of the traditional conference is replaced and where everyone attending is an active participant rather than a passive attendee.
- What the future of transparency is and how transparency is no longer a choice but a competitive requirement.



by Shel Holtz and
John C. Havens

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: TACTICAL TRANSPARENCY

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What Is Transparency?

As Christmas approached in 2006, a blog appeared called *All I Want for Christmas Is a PSP*. Charlie was trying to help his buddy Jeremy get the popular but expensive hand-held entertainment system as a holiday gift. It took only a short time for dozens of people to check the publicly available domain registration and learn the site was registered to a marketing agency called Zipatoni.

The firestorm erupted. Some of the comments posted to the blog included these:

- “This site makes me want to get rid of my PSP.”
- “Things must be going really bad for Sony if all they can afford to promote one of their flagship products are you monkeys.”
- “If you want a PSP badly enough you should get together with an ad agency. Then try to sell the product through a lame Web site while attempting to speak down to what you consider your target audience.”

Even after having been exposed as a fake blog, a deceptive marketing practice, the character Charlie continued trying to convince readers that they were wrong. But the denials only sparked further commentary, which spilled over into message boards. Eventually Sony had to come clean.

In Sept. 2005, media critic, blogger and former *TV Guide* editor Jeff Jarvis wrote a post taking Dell Inc. to task for its failures of customer service and technical support in his efforts to resolve computer problems. Jarvis' series of posts turned into a saga that was followed, reported on, analyzed and spread by hundreds of thou-

sands of people. One man's complaint dragged Dell's already fragile reputation through the mud and affected its share price.

It was a defining moment for Dell, which responded with an overhaul of its approach to customer service and technical support, including the launch of a blog, Direct2Dell, which lays the company bare.

These two stories from real companies, Sony and Dell, portray the extremes of business transparency. Sony introduced a fake identity into an environment where reputation is based on authenticity. It was caught, as inevitably any attempt to deceive will be unveiled, and paid the price with a damaged reputation. Dell, however, began respecting the issues people raised and making their employees accessible to customers. Dell talked openly about problems and engaged customers in conversation about how to fix them. And Dell was rewarded with increased customer loyalty and a reinvigorated reputation.

How Did We Get Here?

A definition of *transparency* must be based on the realities associated with doing business in today's business environment. Those realities have emerged as the result of the convergence of two separate and distinct trends: declining trust in business as usual and the increased public scrutiny under which companies find themselves thanks to the evolution of social media.

Our Definition

The focus here is on *tactical* transparency. The concern is not philosophical but practical. What tools can you use, and how can you make them succeed in order to be sin-



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cerely but prudently transparent in the ways that matter to your stakeholders? There is very little discussion about regulatory compliance but a lot about what customers, consumers, investors, interest groups and other publics can see when they try to look into your company.

The definition of *transparency* is the degree to which an organization shares the following with its stakeholder publics: *its leaders; its employees; its values; its culture; the results of its business practices; and its business strategy.* ●

Someone May Be Looking

While one can hope that the motivation for our current era of transparency stems from an inner desire to promote trust, the nature of modern communications ensures that hiding your head in the sand only increases the impact of your embarrassment when you get caught. At the very least, you likely won't have the support of your public when you need it.

There's good news in all of this: You already have a context for transparency. You practice it in your daily life. Now you just have to translate your personal ethics into the framework of your organization.

The Four Characteristics of Transparency

The basics of situations requiring transparency fall into two primary camps:

1. Something negative has happened, and you need to deal with it.
2. You want to inoculate your organization against such problems by demonstrating your willingness to share information and disclose your business processes.

In either case you'll need to remain open by employing varying degrees of the four characteristics of transparency, or OPEN: *Objectivity; Purpose; Esteem; Navigation.*

If you're worried that someone may be looking, turn around. They are, or soon will be, and hiding is impossible. Begin the process of opening up communication channels between your employees and customers, and see how promoting trust will always be more profitable than spinning lies. ●

Do You Have What It Takes?

To discover where there are gaps in an organization between opacity and transparency, let's explore some of the key characteristics of truly transparent companies.

- Transparent companies do the right thing.
- Transparent companies acknowledge inescapable facts.

Popular Tech Blog Valleywag.com

Popular tech blog Valleywag.com told the story in Nov. 2007 of how college student Kevin Colvin wanted to party on Halloween in Boston. But he was an intern at Anglo Irish Bank and was supposed to be at work on Oct. 31 in New York City. He decided to blow off his job, telling his manager that "something came up at home"; adorned the garb of a fairy princess (literally — with wings and a wand); and had his picture taken by a friend at the party. Enter Facebook, the massive social networking site where anyone's profile is instantly viewable by the Internet community at large. In the case of Kevin, this included his manager, Paul, whose return e-mail stated, "Thanks for letting us know [you wouldn't be at work]. Hope everything is OK in Boston (cool wand)."

The picture and e-mail exchange exploded online with multiple reactions to Kevin's actions and Paul's response.

The lines of privacy and professionalism are blurring. It is ironic that the speed with which personal media can be posted online lies in stark contrast to the permanency of our digital footprints.

- Transparent companies trust their employees.
- Transparent companies have an open-book mindset.
- Leaders and employees of transparent companies are accessible.

Transparent Companies Are Managed by Courageous Leaders

"Leadership, whatever else it takes, takes courage," says Michael Hyatt, president and CEO of Thomas Nelson publishing. "You've got to be willing, as a leader, to set the pace, to be the example, to model what you're asking others to do, and to be courageous in the face of people who might be fearful or are only looking at the downside. You have to focus also on what's the upside, and with very, very modest investments, the returns [on transparency] are huge."

Leadership sets the tone for an organization's culture. "When you have a CEO who blogs, it definitely sets the tone," says Jonathan Schwartz, president and CEO of Sun Microsystems. "When you have a general counsel who blogs, it changes everybody's assumptions of what they ought to be doing on a daily basis. You're much more likely to get in front of a problem, to make the problem known to people, and be much more aggressive and rapid in trying to solve the problem."

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From Prospects to People

Transparency is just another way to be willing to engage with the marketplace. I don't just sell to my customers, I love my customers. I embrace my customers and ask them to embrace me. I ask them for their insights and input. As a result, the products we build become assets of those communities.

Somebody who feels part of a community is going to be a much more aggressive evangelist for our products than someone who just paid \$29.95 for it at a big-box retailer.

—Jonathan Schwartz, president and CEO, Sun Microsystems

The Tactics of Transparency

Transforming your mindset to embrace the idea of relationship-oriented marketing can be a disconcerting paradigm shift if you're accustomed to traditional sales techniques. For a variety of reasons, you cannot guarantee that a person will buy what you have to sell. But you can repeatedly demonstrate your desire to serve that person's needs as they relate to your business relationship. Here's how:

- 1. Get specific.** Investigate the things he deems important about himself, to demonstrate in a meeting that you connect with his content in some way.
- 2. Make small talk big.** The point is not to flatter and certainly not to pry.
- 3. Make your pitch interactive.** Demonstrate your awareness that although you're providing a service to help him solve a problem, you're interested in a partnership, not a dictatorship.
- 4. Give a call to action.** You should also be prepared to offer a next step that will provide value while advancing your relationship.
- 5. Write down a connection point.** It's about demonstrating that you listened to things he said and spent the time to try and help him out with something that's not directly related to a potential sale.
- 6. Practice good timing.** Due diligence is an ongoing process, and one ill-timed communication can sour a relationship you've been working months to create.
- 7. Follow up.**
- 8. Partnering versus closing.** When the plan and the partnership are at the forefront of the proposal and contract, then the onus of the money takes a backseat to the return on investment the initiative will bring.

The Real Return on Investment

Transparency in sales doesn't terminate with a purchase. Making a sale is actually the beginning of what should be a long-term relationship with a person or company you've aligned with to achieve their goals. If

you've partnered with someone to help fulfill the vision for her business, your return on investment will be measured in multiple sales versus a one-off purchase made by forcing someone's hand. ●

Follow the Money

There are lots of folks who can monetize inefficiency. Transparency is much tougher to monetize unless you're on the side of creating value or delivering value. Being the intermediary for value is diminishing in social utility as well as financial value.

—Jonathan Schwartz, president and CEO, Sun Microsystems

Both customer and investor confidence in business plunged during a compressed period of time during which bad behavior by those with fiduciary responsibility seemed to make headlines almost daily. Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, Halliburton, Adelphia, Peregrine Systems and even Martha Stewart led publics to believe they could not trust the management teams who were, after all, employed to manage the investments made by the company's owners.

The gap left by that eroded confidence was filled by regulations that forced companies to be more accountable and to minimize the risk to investors in the future. The most onerous of these regulations, known as Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) after the two senators who introduced the legislation that created it, is also known, tellingly, as the Public Company Accounting Reform and Investor Protection Act of 2002. This legislation contains 11 titles that dictate the responsibilities of a company's board of directors and spell out criminal penalties for dereliction of those responsibilities. In effect, it makes lack of transparency a crime punishable by fine and imprisonment.

Inevitable Change

There are forces, however, paving the way for the adoption of social media as a compliant channel for satisfying Regulation Fair Disclosure, better known as Reg FD. This is the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's set of rules designed to ensure that public companies disclose material information concurrently to all investors so that no single segment of the investment community has an unfair trading advantage.

Current practice relies on the distribution of news releases to satisfy Reg FD, where the information might be conveyed by media through a newspaper or TV news report or read on a Web site, such as Yahoo's financial site. Using a blog provides an opportunity for interaction. When financial information is distributed by a service such as PR Newswire or Business Wire, investors

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are confident that the content is authoritative. Building the same kind of credibility into a blog post will be necessary before the SEC is comfortable designating blogs as a means of compliance. ●

When Things Go Bad

If ever there is a time for organizations to adopt a culture of transparency — and if ever there is a time when corporate leadership is most inclined to shutter the windows and hunker down — it is during an organizational crisis.

What Kinds of Crises Are There?

Crisis communication literature has tackled the categories of crises in a number of ways. Here are three major categories to help determine what type of situation your organization may be facing:

- *Meteor crisis.* Completely unexpected, a meteor crisis falls from the sky. It is usually characterized by randomness and senselessness and is viewed as a terrible thing.
- *Predator crisis.* In *The Insider*, Russell Crowe portrayed former tobacco executive Jeffrey Wigand, who delivered confidential company documents to “60 Minutes.” In a predator crisis, the company is hardly a victim; it must have dirty laundry in order for a predator to air it.
- *Breakdown crisis.* A breakdown crisis occurs when the company fails to perform. ●

Exposing the Company to the Employees Who Make It Work

The lesson is clear: If your employment practices are beyond reproach, you need to make sure employees know what they are. It is in a company’s own self-interest in this new world of intense scrutiny and instant communication to treat its workers well, since the research suggests that treatment translates into positive views of the company’s corporate social responsibility, not to mention increased levels of employee engagement.

Business Literacy

There are aspects of the business that can be exposed to employees — aspects about which employees in many organizations have long been kept in the dark. Ask yourself these questions:

1. Can my employees list our most important customers, what they buy from us, why we’re their provider of choice, what we can do to improve those relationships and what we might do to damage them?

2. Can my employees name our key competitors, how we compete with them, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and what our strengths and weaknesses are that might lead a customer to choose one of them instead of us?

3. Do my employees know what we make and sell beyond the products or services for which they have direct responsibility? Do they know what our other business units do?

4. Are my employees knowledgeable about the issues that could become obstacles to our ability to compete, such as legal challenges and regulatory threats? ●

Meet the Press

Having been focused on using the tools of new media to open the organization, the work of traditional public relations churns on. The increased participation in conversations through resources like blogs does not herald a simultaneous reduction in media relations efforts. The idea that social networks and the increasingly important public commons will replace public journalism is patently absurd, at least for now.

Transparency Channels

Transparency with the media begins with a simple pledge to keep the press informed about stories it’s covering. Silence breeds suspicion, but regular updates quell distrust, assuming the information provided is accurate and honest. ●

The View From the Top

Over at The New PR, a wiki that serves as a community-built resource for communicators seeking information on new media, a page listing CEO bloggers has grown to impressive proportions. Nearly 30 countries are represented. Some, like Austria, Hungary and Israel, feature only a couple of names. But there are 15 in the listing for the United Kingdom, 41 in France and close to 200 in the United States. True, not every one of these names is a CEO. And while some of the companies represented are very small, others are well-known organizations such as Macmillan Publishing, Boeing, Lenovo, Pitney Bowes, NBC, General Motors Corp., Marriott International, Sun Microsystems and McDonald’s. The list is by no means comprehensive. Only those who have discovered The New PR and elect to contribute to it have been added to the list.

What Openness Means

Organizations steeped in an opaque culture resist dis-

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cussion about anything sensitive and disclosure of anything they are not required to disclose. Transparent organizations don't have problems with these topics. Paul Levy (CEO of Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital in Boston), for example, wrote a post about his salary titled, "Do I Make Too Much?" The post attracted a lot of attention in large part because the candid discussion of his income startled so many people.

The fact that a CEO blog reaches employees as well as other audiences is important to Sun Microsystems President and CEO Jonathan Schwartz:

I like to think of ourselves as a very simple business. We want to recruit all the developers in the world, and then we want to help them develop applications that require innovative infrastructure that we like to sell to the world. But there are a lot of moving parts inside Sun, and to put in a blog why we're doing all the things we're doing allows me to communicate not only to the marketplace, but to all employees.

Blogs Are Tools

Blogs, like any other communication channel, are, at their core, just tools. A CEO or other organizational leader is equally capable of carrying on a conversation that flings open the windows into a company through a podcast, a message board or even a profile on a social network like Facebook. ●

En-Gauge the Conversation

The point is that we're McDonald's and everyone knows us. We're a big brand; we have size; we have influence. We're already part of the discussion anyway. People already talk about us, so the idea is [that] we want to be engaged in that conversation and post the good and the negative.

— Bob Langert, vice president, corporate social responsibility, McDonald's

Whatever the size of your brand or the nature of your business, you have a unique angle on it. If you aren't communicating this value proposition online, you're conspicuous by your absence. More important, if you haven't created a conduit for customers to interact with your brand, you're sending the message that you don't care about their opinion. Whether that's true is irrelevant: If people think you're not listening, they'll eventually start talking about you (in ways you won't like) and buying from someone else.

Blogs that focus on a specific business issue provide two distinct advantages for any organization:

- They provide an opportunity to demonstrate an area of expertise.

- They provide a forum for people to talk about your ideas and brand.

What to Do Next

Get to know some popular policy blogs to see how you can focus on a central issue over a prolonged period of time and create dialogue for better understanding. These three examples are outstanding:

1. Google's public policy blog:
<http://googlepublicpolicy.blogspot.com>
2. Cisco's High Tech Policy blog:
<http://blogs.cisco.com/gov>
3. The Know HR blog:
<http://www.knowhr.com/blog/> ●

From the Inside Looking Out

Expert Dominic Jones makes an important point. The voices of employees, articulated through employee blogs to which the public has access, provide investors with insight into the depth of talent and subject matter expertise available in the company. Depending on the level of the employee, these blogs can also spotlight the quality of the company's management. And these, Jones said, are critical considerations that influence investment decisions.

Employee Blogs

Most leaders are inclined to laugh when hearing the idea that employees should blog on behalf of the company. Yet the companies that have taken that step report an overwhelming positive outcome compared to few, if any, minor problems. Michael Hyatt, CEO of Thomas Nelson, sees three key benefits deriving from employees who blog for his company:

- To raise the visibility of our company and our products
- To make a contribution to the publishing community
- To give people a look at what goes on inside a real publishing company. ●

Transparency Beyond Text

How much do you read in one day? If you add up the number of e-mails, text messages, magazine and newspaper articles, and other content you digest in one day, it's no wonder we escape to music or video after work to decompress. Media that move beyond text, however, engage our minds in different ways and capture our attention in a more visceral manner. Other media don't demean the importance or ubiquity of text, but offer a compelling way to build trust and community with your consumers or employees.

Multimedia Is One of the Best Channels for Showing Your Face to the World

Transparency accrues from multimedia in a variety of ways, not the least of which is the ability to see and hear real people, making it far easier to judge their credibility than with more traditional text. And as an added benefit, the barriers to the production of multimedia have crumbled. What once required a professional crew, expensive equipment and costly distribution channels now can be produced for little, or even no, money and distributed over the Net at little or no cost. ●

Profile and Privacy

Participating in social networks for your organization also presents important legal and privacy issues that must be addressed when people are creating posting profiles willy-nilly across the Web. When digital footprints exist online in perpetuity, campaigns need to be structured in order to comply with the guidelines established by your organization, before profiles or media are created and posted.

Social networking offers an opportunity for companies to engage in authentic conversation with their employees and customers. It's immediate and personal and allows modes of communication that can't be found in traditional e-mail or phone conversations. But a social networking strategy also needs to be implemented for an organization, largely based on Jonathan Vanasco's notion about thinking:

The Internet reflects this very classical American tendency of instant gratification and instant interaction. You don't really think before you post online. You don't think about the context or tone of what you're saying or how does it fit into a larger dialogue. I think for the most part what people need to do more of is think.

What to Do Next

1. Visit a number of social networking sites and see how they work.
2. Revisit sites that capture your attention.
3. Join a network (or more than one) where you feel a kinship with a community.
4. Blend your online personas by listing the networks you belong to at your central online portal.
5. Adapt the lessons you learn for your personal interactions with social networks for your business. ●

The Case for Face to Face

Transparency is hard to fake in person. Someone who confronts you at work or a party will see your expression and your body language as a response to his or her accusation. In the same way, when you see a friend, you can hug your friend and look into his or her eyes without relying on a webcam.

Knowing it's impossible to meet face to face as often as we might like, business relationships can be greatly enhanced (or diminished) by the ways we interact when we are able to connect in person.

The "Unconference" Movement

"Unconferences" do away with much of the formality that exists around the traditional conference model, largely because everyone who comes is an active participant rather than a passive attendee.

Wikis are typically used for registration — for people who want to come and those who want to speak. The logic here is that everyone has something to say, so why shouldn't they say it? For some unconferences, there's even a model under which you're expected to speak; being a wallflower isn't even an option.

Meetings encourage accountability, vulnerability and a reflection of a basic human need: to convene in person to learn, network and get away from the office. ●

Addressing Loss of Control

Loss of control of your company's message is nothing new. Social media and the improvement of digital technology have simply increased the speed at which messages about your company and your brand can be transmitted by people over whom you have no control.

Control What You Can

1. Be vigilant in your corporate communication policies, especially e-mail, so information that should remain confidential is not leaked.
2. Be vigilant in your fact-checking.
3. Report retractions or corrections of previous stories.
4. Provide multiple ways for customers to opt out of your service, online and off.

Creating transparent portals for your brand actually protects you from more online negativity than does staying silent. Silence implies you don't care and aren't listening. And when clients think you're not listening, they lose trust and buy from your competitors. That's the real loss you should be focused on. ●

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Yeah, But...Overcoming Objections

Every organization will face resistance to transparency from forces that see only the downside. Organizations that have thrived on opacity will be the hardest to change, but even those inclined to embrace the principles outlined in this book will run into roadblocks from lawyers, regulatory affairs staff, IT departments, some occupants of the executive suite and external critics.

The objections fall into these major categories:

- Legal and regulatory.
- Competitive.
- Technical.
- Investment.

The Benefits Are Huge

The benefits are indeed huge. Transparency makes it easier to recruit, identify product and service opportunities, avoid onerous regulations and legislation, and forge alliances and partnerships with people and companies that can help your company achieve results that weren't possible before. Transparency creates loyalty among customers, confidence among investors and fairness from the media. ●

Your Road Map to Transparency

By now you should be keenly aware that no organization can hide its head in the sand and avoid implementing the tools that will help it create better dialogue with customers, partners and employees. This transformational process should take place in the following steps:

1. Assess.
2. Adjust the culture.
3. Establish your voice.
4. Create an action plan.

Crises — SWAT Team in Place

Have you got your own SWAT team for your business? If not, here's a place to start:

- Create an action plan for crisis before you're in a crisis.
- Determine the key players in your organization.
- Establish the methodology for how all key players will be communicated to and how to reach them.
- For the first meeting of the key players have the most knowledgeable person explain the crisis and have an agenda along with potential ways to deal with the crisis.
- Establish a time frame.
- Discuss ideas on how to deal with the crisis.
- Evaluate all scenarios.

- However you decide to respond to a crisis, provide channels of feedback for key stakeholders about your decision. ●

The Future of Transparency

The future of transparency is not a matter of asking how much more transparent your organization should be in the future. There are really only two approaches to transparency:

1. That which is required by law
2. The division you make between what you will keep hidden, for competitive or other legitimate reasons, and what you will subject to public scrutiny

From this perspective, the notion of the future of transparency seems a bit shallow. But there are a few factors to consider.

- **More regulation.** If the events that led Sens. Paul Sarbanes and Michael Oxley to introduce legislation that forced transparency on organizations aren't enough to make it clear, opacity will lead to more regulation.

- **Changes in business.** Boeing partnered with a number of other companies around the world, leveraging their capabilities and expertise. Boeing, however, has gone to great lengths to explain the process, its risks and its benefits. The company worked hard to be transparent. Boeing's global, multicompany manufacturing scheme is just one example of how business is undergoing change.

- **Changes in communication.** The communication channels employed by business, media and the public change at a pace that's hard to keep up with. New tools are introduced, it seems every day (and sometimes several times a day). ●

Conclusion

Transparency is not a choice. It is a legal, moral, and competitive requirement. Choice factors into the equation in terms of what you will make transparent and keep secret, and in terms of the strategies and tools you will use to behave in a transparent manner.

Whether your organization recognizes this and adopts the practices outlined or remains opaque and risks the unintended exposure of practices and behaviors you wouldn't want your mother to read about in the newspaper is immaterial.

Either way, you will be seen.

Literally. ●