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Should you ghostwrite a blog for the CEO?

PR pros debate the value—and pitfalls—of behind-the-scenes blogging

Depending on who you talk to, "ghost blogging" is either a big fraud that will blow up in your organization's face, or a smart communications strategy that allows you to join the blogosphere. Whichever side of the argument you fall on, rest assured that organizations that rely on ghost blogging are still in the closet about the practice.

While there's a spectrum of ways that PR professionals can help an organization develop blog content, "ghost blogging" is generally taken to mean outright scripting of a post that carries someone else's name—like that of the CEO or the executive director. For some PR pros, ghost blogging is a dangerous practice.

"Ghost blogging is just about the worst PR tactic," insists Andy Abramson, CEO of Comunicano, a marketing communications company in Del Mar, Calif. "It's fraudulent, and it's wrong."

The whole point of blogging, says Abramson, is to offer a more personalized form of communication than you do with your Web site, press release or other tools, says Abramson. "The blog is a special form of communication that relates you to your business," he says. "You can't have another person between you and your blog."

Shel Holtz, principal of Holtz Communication + Technology and a popular blogger himself, is also skeptical that a ghostwritten blog can truly make a connection with a social media audience. "The whole idea of a blog is to engage in a conversation," Holtz explains. "You're saying, 'This is really me, and I want to have a conversation with you.'" When you get a ghost writer to pen that conversation, Holtz says, it's not genuine.

Is it ghost blogging—or is it editing?

Despite the bad buzz about ghost blogging, there are indeed major companies farming out their blog content. Mikal Belicove of Orem, Utah, is a full-time ghost blogger for several CEOs.

"For many people, ghost blogging flies in the face of the authenticity of blogging," Belicove says, "until I mention how speech writers typically meet with their clients and target their words and thoughts toward the target audience." Belicove points out that he doesn't work in a vacuum when he writes blogs.

"I work hard to get inside the head of the CEO," he explains. "And at the end of the day, they're the ones pressing the 'publish' button." Belicove says he has constant contact with the CEOs for whom he blogs, and solicits their opinions on key business issues. He'll also look at video of the executives to get a sense of their conversational style.

Belicove says the fuss about ghost blogging is a bit overblown, considering that communications professionals usually tinker to some extent with execs' copy. At a recent communications conference, Belicove was pointed out by a session moderator, and several PR pros said they were put off by the idea of a ghostwritten blog.

"But then they all admitted that they do edit their CEO's blogs," says Belicove. "I would challenge the idea that CEO blogs are 100 percent written by the executives."


According to Belicove and other writers, there's a lot of gray area between a blog that's solely penned by a CEO, and one that's ghostwritten and operates with no input from the blogger. For instance, some PR pros may draft outlines of blog posts and allow the exec to add his or her personal touch to the post. Others may help create editorial calendars, or suggest topics for posts.

Such intervention seems to be more acceptable than flat-out ghosting. And everyone—from the anti-ghost bloggers, to the ghost bloggers themselves—seems to agree that an absence of collaboration leads to a bad blog.

"Anyone who's written speeches knows you need access to your speaker in order to do a good job, and that's just as true when you're ghost blogging—maybe even more so, since if you're doing it right, you're reflecting how your person's thinking evolves from day to day or week to week," wrote an anonymous speechwriter recently for Ragan.com. (After getting cut off from meetings with the CEO, on the assumption that such contacts were no longer needed, the speechwriter asked to be reassigned to another writing job.)

Belicove has the same view of hands-off ghost blogging "The disastrous situation is where the CEO takes a hands-off approach to the blog and doesn't know what's being posted," says the writer.


That's exactly the scenario that makes Andy Abramson so negative about ghost blogging. "What if a journalist asks the CEO how they came to a certain opinion in a post—

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and they don't know anything about it?" says Abramson. And then there's the question of what happens when someone else in the blogosphere exposes the fact that you're ghost blogging—a likely scenario, given that passions run high about authenticity.

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"Once you're outed, your entire company is mistrusted," says Abramson. "You'd have been better off not blogging at all."



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Contribute ideas instead of flat-out ghosting

Allison Nazarian, president of Get It In Writing of Boca Raton, Fla., writes blog posts for clients and is unfazed by the criticism around ghost blogging—and like Belicove, says the best ghosting is a collaborative effort.

"It's like any other kind of journal-ism," says Nazarian. "I do a lot of competitive research, I use an editorial calendar, and I get to know the person well. Some of my clients allow me to post for them without reviewing, and some like to review the posts or add their own point of view to what I write."

For one client, Nazarian writes the posts that are of a newsy nature; they don't require personal opinion, and are simply meant to inform the reader. The client writes the posts that demand first-person accounts of a business issue.

"When they do get personal, then I think it's disingenuous" to ghost a post, says Nazarian. "I don't even touch that kind of writing."

PR pros who despair over getting executives to blog—but are nervous about ghost blogging—can find a less risky way to assist, says Claire Celsi, PR account supervisor at Integer Midwest in Des Moines, Iowa. She has helped clients develop editorial calendars for blogs posts and has researched ideas for content.

For a window manufacturer, Celsi and her colleagues presented the client with ideas for about 20 subjects they could blog about, such as useful information for consumers shopping for windows. She's also done research on competitor blogs so that she can suggest appropriate topics to her client—for instance, if the competitor is talking about an issue that her client needs to address.

"There's a lot you can do to help" without resorting to ghost blogging, Celsi believes. "For instance, you could write a starter paragraph, and ask them to take off on the idea. But ghostwriting them without disclosure—I wouldn't recommend that at all."

At LaBovick & LaBovick, a law firm in Jupiter, Fla., marketing director Juliet Sallette helps attorneys with the firm's two blogs by occasionally penning news-oriented posts about current stories relating to personal injury or "whistleblower" cases. Sallette leaves her name off of these posts so as not to mislead readers—although that practice bothers some blogging diehards. "I've gotten scolding e-mails about not using a name," she says.

This is as far as Sallette will go with ghost-blogging, and she points to a recent post by managing partner Brian LaBovick as an example of the value of authentic blogging. LaBovick wrote a post defending the importance of the contingency-fee system for the average person who needs to wage a legal fight. That opinionated and candid post, says Sallette, generated a lot of buzz (positive and negative) about the firm—certainly valuable exposure. Says Sallette, "How could a ghostwriter, someone outside the firm, have written that?"

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