



Corporate Influencer

The power of employees communicating for their organizations

- ▶ Corporate influencers – also known as corporate ambassadors – have become a powerful communication tool for organizations. Their authentic and credible communication on a wide range of topics can have positive effects on outreach, reputation, employee engagement and much more. On the other hand, impulsive or critical statements made by corporate ambassadors can have a negative effect. Organizations should therefore provide trainings and guidelines.
- ▶ Recently, many scientific disciplines have devoted attention to this phenomenon. However, academic studies from the perspective of corporate communications are still lacking. A research project at Leipzig University in collaboration with Deutsche Telekom sheds light on the different expectations towards corporate ambassadors within an organization.
- ▶ This Communication Snapshot explores the benefits and challenges of corporate influencers, the types of ambassadors that exist, and presents steps to manage existing or future ambassador programs.

The new super heroes for communication

With the rise of social media, employees speaking about or on behalf of their organizations have come to the fore. They have become known as **corporate ambassadors, corporate influencers, or brand evangelists** – depending on the discipline. For example, the term brand ambassador is widely used in marketing.

Compared to external social media influencers, corporate ambassadors or corporate influencers are employees of the organization who **act on a voluntary and unpaid basis**, regardless of their specialist background and job description.

Many ambassadors are **motivated intrinsically by joy and appreciation**. They want to expand their own network, acquire new competencies and enrich their daily work. Beyond their personal goals, they are willing to support the organization's objectives and even stand up for it should negative news arise.

However, being a communicator for the organization can cause **conflicts** with superiors and colleagues if these activities take place during working hours and if their team doesn't see the benefits of it. It also can create a higher workload for the ambassador who might feel obliged to be available 24/7. And last but not least, conflicts may arise if corporate ambassadors don't align their communication activities with the overall corporate communications strategy or, in more serious cases, violate the organization's ethical principles or political standpoints.

Benefits and challenges

Corporate ambassadors are already proving successful in many organizations. They convey **authentic and credible messages** and thus help to **motivate other employees**. They can enhance **employee engagement and retention**. Externally, they are likely to have a positive effect on corporate reputation, trust, and employer branding.

A major challenge for organizations is to find the appropriate **balance between autonomy and control**. Corporate ambassadors are supposed to act flexibly and autonomously. At the same time, an organization needs to preserve its brand identity and corporate values which might not go hand in hand with the standpoints of the ambassador.

Another challenge is finding the adequate balance between **authenticity and professionalism**: if the communication department introduces guidelines that are too strict, corporate ambassadors might feel restricted and lose their authenticity. If there are no guidelines, inappropriate content might be distributed that could negatively impact on the organization's reputation.

To use corporate influencers to their full potential, two additional parties have to be examined closely with regards to their communication needs and interests: 1) the **communication department** who is in charge of the overall communication strategy; 2) other **internal departments and divisions** who employ corporate influencers. They have to release their employees for these new communication activities.

Benefits for the organization:

- Enrichment of communication (authenticity)
- Strengthened employer branding
- Stronger internal and external positioning
- Enhanced stakeholder trust
- Fostering the corporate culture
- Positive impact on reputation
- Lower transaction costs in the long term



Challenges for the organization:

- Imbalance between autonomy of the influencer and control by the communications department
- Lack of integrated communication due to multiple voices
- Loss of control of the organization's representation (brand identity & corporate values)
- Negative impact on reputation

The graphic presents benefits and challenges for organizations working with corporate influencers that were derived from an extensive literature review.



» Imagine the potential when up to 386,000 employees announce that Siemens is a great company? It would be stupid not to take advantage of it.«

Clarissa Haller, Head of Corporate Communications, Siemens AG

Eight ambassador types

Different types of corporate ambassadors can be found within an organization. Depending on the objectives the organization wants to pursue, it can employ specific types of corporate influencers, e.g. a technical experts from the R&D department to promote new technologies.



The **social CEO** is an ambassador at management level.



The **rock star** is a strong personal brand who enjoys visibility beyond the corporate context.



The **communications expert** is characterized by his/her professional approach to issues and target groups.



The **technical expert** advances the specialist communication of a corporation.



The **customer assistant** acts as a contact person for (potential) private and business customers.



The **networker** is in contact with colleagues and thus actively expands their network.



The **initiator** likes to bring in new ideas.



The **advocate** is regarded as a voice for employee issues and promotes employee motivation and loyalty.

Three steps to manage ambassador programs

Corporate ambassador programs can either grow organically as at Deutsche Telekom or can be set up strategically. Many corporations, e.g. OTTO or Microsoft, have begun to institute training programs with the aim of enabling and empowering corporate ambassadors. Siemens, for example, has created a content pool with messages and Deutsche Telekom has established a mentoring program bringing together experienced and new ambassadors.

To help organization take an existing ambassador program to the next level or to set up a new program, the research team at Leipzig University has proposed a **three-step approach**. The goal is to **uncover the expectations** of the various stakeholders and to find a **common understanding** of how to collaborate in the future.

Step 1: Check preconditions and ensure support from the top

The success or failure of corporate ambassador programs will depend on the organizational context. The most important preconditions to successfully implement such a program are:

- An open corporate culture including a positive feedback culture
- Acceptance of multiple voices (different opinions)
- Support from top management

Step 2: Clarify expectations and objectives of all parties involved

Identify those internal stakeholders with communication needs such as HR, IT or sales and ask them about their expectations: What benefits and caveats do they see when collaborating with ambassadors? Will they support such a program? These expectations have to be compared to the expectations of the ambassadors themselves and those of the communication department. If a common understanding of what should be achieved has been found, the next step is to find the processes and structures needed for collaboration.

Step 3: Decide on processes for collaboration

Start with evaluating the status quo of collaboration: Which processes are in place? What can be improved? Which routines and what kind of technology or content management might be useful to collaborate more effectively in the future?

Looking at the communications department, they can support corporate ambassadors in different ways:

- Coaching and training to professionalize ambassadors
- Advising and answering questions as a communications expert
- Controlling and monitoring the processes and actions of the ambassadors and intervening when something goes wrong
- Providing possible topics that can be taken up and communicated by the ambassadors

About the research project

The findings presented here are from a research project headed by Prof. Dr. Ansgar Zerfuß at **Leipzig University** in close collaboration with **Deutsche Telekom AG**. In 2018, in-depth interviews were conducted with Telekom employees within the communication department, corporate ambassadors, and other departments such as HR, marketing, and sales. The interviews explored the motives and attitudes as well as the experiences and expectations of the three groups with regards to the corporate ambassador's initiative and their collaboration.



The Academic Society for Corporate Management & Communication is an initiative of leading companies and universities in Germany and beyond. It aims to shape the future of corporate communications through joint research projects and knowledge sharing.

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