# THE CMO'S GUIDE TO
# BRAND JOURNALISM

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**1**

*Media and marketing are converging, as more brands launch publishing operations.*

**2**

*Storytelling is a powerful way to connect with customers.*

**3**

*The key to gaining the trust of your audience is to publish material that is credible and honest.*

# INTRODUCTION

*Dan Lyons*

Call it what you will: brand journalism, corporate journalism, corporate media. More and more companies are creating "journalistic" content. Some are hiring actual journalists. Others are building studios, hiring camera crews and launching dedicated news sites to cover themselves and their industries.

If you're a CEO or CMO of a mid-sized or large brand, you may have started thinking about building an in-house news operation. Our goal is to help you figure out how to do this. We'll help you structure a team and figure out what obstacles you should expect to encounter and how to get over them.

These days pretty much every company has some kind of corporate blog. At the most basic level, the idea is to use the blog in lieu of press releases. But some companies want to do more.

Some create content in order to generate leads. For them, news is just another form of content that can be used to attract an audience of readers who might be converted into paying customers.

Others produce news as a kind of service to their customers. There's no expectation of a direct return on investment. The goal might be brand awareness, using storytelling to create a new image of the company.

Blogging can also be a form of public relations. Mainstream media outlets might see a story on a corporate blog and then write their own version of it. Some companies find themselves compelled to cover the news about their industry simply because the mainstream media does a poor job (or no job at all) of covering them.

Consider the semiconductor industry. There was a time, not so long ago, when technology trade journals and mainstream newspapers alike regularly wrote about the chip business. But today that's no longer the case.

**Publications make money by selling ads, and that makes them hungry for traffic. The best way to generate page views is to write about Apple rumors, or the hot new social networking startup with a 22-year-old founder and a multi-billion-dollar valuation. Stories about 28-nanometer wafer fabs just aren't sexy enough.**

It's no surprise, then, that chipmakers like Intel, IBM, Qualcomm and nVidia have been leaders in creating media operations.

Companies are also hiring journalists to fill a void that has been created by the decline of traditional media outlets. In 1980, the ratio of PR professionals to journalists in the United States was 1.2 to 1. By 2010, three decades later, there were four PR professionals for every journalist in the U.S.

The media is overwhelmed and simply can't keep up. The best way to be part of the story is simply to become a journalist yourself.

This book explores reasons for building a media operation inside your company, and provides case studies of companies that are pioneers in the field. We're drawing on interviews with corporate journalists at GE, Intel, IBM, Microsoft, and HubSpot.

I'm also drawing on three decades of my own experience in the mainstream media business, including 10 years as a tech reporter at Forbes and four years as technology editor of Newsweek. Like some of my reporter friends, I've recently made the transition to the world of corporate journalism. In 2013 I joined HubSpot to help out with its media team. I hope that the lessons I've learned can be useful to others.

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There was a time when the only job a journalist could do inside a big corporation was to work in public relations. But in the past few years journalists have started leaping into corporations with titles like "managing editor," and a role that involves running a corporate newsroom.

Cisco, Intel, Microsoft and Oracle all operate newsrooms. Maersk, the shipping company, has a news operation. So does Nissan, the Japanese automaker. LinkedIn has a managing editor. So does GE. Three big venture capital firms in Silicon Valley, Sequoia Capital, Andreessen Horowitz and Battery Ventures, have hired in-house journalists from the Wall Street Journal, Wired, and Forbes, respectively.

It's not just big companies, either. Kapost, a small startup in Boulder, Colo., hired Jesse Noyes, a former Boston Herald reporter, to run its content marketing operation. I'm another example. I'm the former technology editor at Newsweek, and now I'm a blogger at HubSpot, a 650-person marketing software company in Cambridge, Mass.

Not only are a lot of companies getting into the media business, some are creating legitimate journalism. As I wrote recently after seeing the amazing work that Microsoft is doing on its Stories website, "It's Happening: Corporate Media Is Getting Better than Mainstream Media."

At the same time, media companies are increasingly running content created by companies. So-called native advertising now runs on BuzzFeed, Huffington Post and Business Insider, as well as august brands like Forbes, The Atlantic, the Washington Post and New York Times. Some media companies even operate studios to create that sponsored content. Basically, they're building in-house advertising agencies.

Brands are moving into the space once occupied by media companies, while media companies are moving into digital marketing.

***These two worlds -- the world of media and the world of marketing -- are smashing into each other, and producing all sorts of weird new hybrids.***

It's not so surprising, when you consider that in fact these two worlds have always had a symbiotic relationship.

There are lots of ways to go about creating media inside a corporation. We're going to look at four models that are in use today. They are:

**BRAND AWARENESS.** You're publishing stories because you want people to know about your company. You're not trying to generate sales directly from those articles. Examples: GE and IBM.

**INDUSTRY NEWS.** You write about your own company and your industry, creating coverage that supplements the work of mainstream media. Examples: Intel and Microsoft.

**CREATE AND SPONSOR.** You want to establish your company as a thought leader, so you create an independent site. Example: Adobe's CMO.com.

**LEAD GENERATION.** You use content as a way to generate leads that can be converted into customers. Example: HubSpot.

## BRAND AWARENESS: GE REPORTS

Tomas Kellner spent eight years as a business reporter at Forbes, and now is managing editor of GE Reports, an online publication that GE created to tell stories about its people and its innovations. Kellner publishes six or seven articles a week. He writes most of the articles himself, but also gets some from an outside agency.

Kellner also has created a role that involves traveling to GE locations and teaching storytelling workshops. "We have held the workshops at GE businesses in the U.S. as well as Istanbul, Buenos Aires, Beijing and elsewhere around the world. The idea is that GE communicators ultimately will pitch and write stories and serve as GE Reports correspondents, instead of producing press releases that few people read and care about," Kellner says.

Kellner's performance isn't measured in terms of lead generation. GE isn't expecting to create content that will sell jet engines. Rather, Kellner is trying to build brand awareness. "We look at traffic, as well as the number of outside media links to GE Reports and the quality of the links. We like that popular blogs like Gizmodo are reading GE Reports, but we've been picked up by Wired, the New Scientist, Fast Company and other traditional media outlets. All of that counts."

One of Kellner's recent articles was "Going to Extremes," about a Czech aircraft manufacturer, Aircraft Industries, that uses GE aircraft engines. Aircraft Industries had won a deal to provide small planes to an airline in Nepal. Kellner wrote the article, which was accompanied by video shot by GE staffers wearing GoPro cameras. Another recent story that Kellner loved writing was "A Flight of Fancy," a profile of a design student who spent five years building an incredible exact replica of a Boeing 777 jetliner out of paper.

Kellner reports to the director of communications, and he's part of the PR operation. GE Reports is part of a larger effort around storytelling at GE which was initiated by Chief Marketing Officer Beth Comstock. Kellner is writing for multiple constituencies, including customers, potential customers, employees of GE, business partners, investors and technology enthusiasts. "This job gives me a perspective on what the world is going to be like in five or 15 years. I want to learn something new every day," Kellner says.

## PROJECTING THOUGHT LEADERSHIP: STEVE HAMM, IBM

IBM's primary blogs, A Smarter Planet, IBM Research, and CitizenIBM tell stories and present points of view on societal, industry and business transformation, including IBM's (ASP); scientific advances (IBM Research); and corporate involvement in social progress (Citizen IBM). The main goal in these websites is to present IBM's ideas about how to make the world work better. In addition to publishing posts by IBM writers and executives, the sites also publish posts by leaders of other organizations, academics, government bodies, etc. who have worthwhile points of view on these themes. Bottom line: IBM is telling its own story, influencing people about ways to use

technology to make progress, and engaging in a conversation.

During his 12-year career at BusinessWeek, Steve Hamm wrote more than 30 cover stories about technology and made a name for himself as one of the finest and most respected journalists in tech. In 2009 he made the jump to corporate life, joining IBM as a communications strategist, writer and videographer. He reports to the head of corporate external relations.

A big part of his focus involves IBM's vaunted research division, and he's especially passionate about IBM's cognitive computing initiatives, including its Jeopardy-playing supercomputer, Watson. Hamm also co-authored a book with John E. Kelly III, director of iBM Research, "Smart Machines: IBM's Watson and the Era of Cognitive Computing."

"It's a very exciting area," Hamm says. "We're talking about 50 years of work on artificial intelligence, and other related areas, that is all finally coming to fruition. It's kind of amazing to see, to be there when it happens."

Hamm writes for IBM's Smarter Planet blog, which logged more than 850,000 unique visitors last year. He writes strategic white papers, and helps company executives develop byliners and op-eds. He also contributes sponsored content to mainstream publications like Forbes, Huffington Post, Wired, and The New Yorker, with which IBM has advertising relationships.

Hamm doesn't reach the kind of huge audience he did when he was writing for BusinessWeek, but some of the videos he's made have been viewed 80,000 times. The goal is not traffic for the sake of traffic, but rather reaching the right people – including IBM clients, business partners, journalists, bloggers and industry analysts.

*"I sometimes think the real audience is an audience of one,"* Hamm says. *"If I publish something about an IBM researcher that makes that person feel good, and makes her feel motivated and want to stay at IBM, then that's a valuable service I have performed for the company. So sometimes I just think about that one person."*

Hamm has also been able to pursue his passion for writing about tech in India and Africa. Reporting on stories for IBM he has traveled to Africa, China, Europe, Latin America. He's working with smart people, and telling stories about brilliant scientists whose work will change the world. "I feel like a very fortunate human being," he says.

## INDUSTRY NEWS: INTEL FREE PRESS

Bill Calder is founding editor of the Intel Free Press, a news operation inside Intel that was launched in 2010. It's a three-person operation housed inside Intel's PR department, with Calder, a former journalist and longtime PR guy, in charge, and Benjamin Tomkins, a journalist who previously was the managing editor of InformationWeek. Others inside Intel also contribute to the blog sometimes.

Calder measures traffic, but doesn't really care what the number is every month and isn't concerned with trying to boost traffic from month to month. Nor is he trying to generate sales leads. Intel sees the Free Press as a way to cover stories that aren't being covered elsewhere, and possibly to persuade mainstream outlets to pick up those stories themselves.

"We write for the brand, but also for other journalists who may be looking for interesting angles or related stories and ideas," Calder says.

"In some respects, we're a seed generator. Also, we're providing free content for websites and other blogs. If a story we write influences a journalist to do the same story, or if they use our stuff directly, that's the best validation."

Some sites will pick up an Intel Free Press story and run the whole thing verbatim. Others will link to an Intel Free Press story. Others will read the Intel Free Press story and get excited enough to send a reporter and do their own version of the story. From Intel's perspective, those are all wins.

Some Free Press stories don't have anything to do with Intel. One compelling piece was an interview with a research scientist who is also an explorer for the National Geographic Society.

The site publishes three or four articles a week. Most of the writing is done by a few people from the Intel PR team who have Free Press as part of their job duties. The Free Press site shoots a lot of original photos and keeps all of them on a Flickr stream where anyone can download and use them. The primary goal is to get others talking (and writing) about Intel.

"We're not measuring ROI by how many leads we generate or how many page views we get," Calder says. "The purpose here is to really provide some behind-the-scenes context, and cover stuff that we feel is relevant even if may not even be directly related to our core business."

What matters most, Calder says, is credibility. "So much of this is about establishing credibility. A win is when one of our stories gets picked up not because it comes from Intel, but because it's just a solid news story."

## INDUSTRY NEWS: MICROSOFT

Microsoft runs one of the finest publishing operations that I've seen, a site called Stories that publishes long-form articles with beautiful photographs and high-quality videos arranged in a full-page magazine-style layout. In terms of presentation, Stories is better than almost anything being done by mainstream media companies.

The Stories team is led by Steve Clayton, whose title is "Chief Storyteller." Clayton is a former Microsoft sales engineer in London whose personal blog caught the attention of Frank Shaw, MIcrosoft's head of PR. Shaw offered Clayton the chance to move to Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, Wash., and become a full-time blogger, writing about anything he finds interesting on Microsoft's campus.

There are no traffic goals, and no requirements about generating leads. To some extent Clayton's team is simply telling stories that mainstream media can't or won't tell on their own. One great example is a story called "88 Acres: How Microsoft Quietly Built the City of the Future."

The story came about after Clayton met the executive who runs MIcrosoft's facilities. Turns out Microsoft had done some amazing things in the area of building automation. But when Microsoft PR pitched the story to mainstream publications, they passed.

So Clayton's team did the story themselves. The package they produced was far better than anything that a newspaper or magazine would have done.

The story drew half a million views, but better yet, it actually generated sales. That's because facilities managers from other companies saw the article and asked Microsoft to come help them smarten up their buildings. The Stories site wasn't created to generate revenue, but the fact that it could do so was especially gratifying, and a testament to the power of storytelling, Clayton says.

## CREATE AND SPONSOR: ADOBE AND CMO.COM

Adobe Systems is best known for its suite of publishing and multimedia products, like Photoshop and InDesign. But in recent years Adobe has expanded into making software for marketing departments, selling a suite of programs called the Adobe Marketing Cloud.

To establish thought leadership in the marketing space, in 2009 Adobe launched CMO.com, which is solely sponsored by Adobe but exists on its own web address, separate from Adobe's corporate site. Adobe says it created the site as "a demonstration of Adobe's commitment to helping CMOs lead their companies in a digital world."

The site's editor-in-chief is Tim Moran, who previously spent 20 years as a technology journalist. CMO.com does a lot of news aggregation, gathering up articles from around the web that are relevant to chief marketing officers. Articles come from dozens of other sources, such as Wired, Mashable and Advertising Age, and more than 150 marketing-related sites. "Editors review this content every day, picking only the best and most pertinent for inclusion on the site. CMO.com also produces its own `exclusive content,' which is either assigned to and written by some of the best business journalists around, or obtained from industry, such as brands, agencies, consultants, and researchers," Moran says.

The idea is to provide a single source where CMOs can keep up to date with all the information in their world, via the site or two weekly newsletters. CMO.com tries to differentiate itself from other marketing sites by aiming at higher level marketing executives and decision makers rather than "manager-level practitioners" who are well served by other marketing sites.

## LEAD GENERATION: HUBSPOT

Content has been central to HubSpot's business since the company's founding in 2006. The basic idea of inbound marketing is that companies can use content to draw potential customers toward them. HubSpot pioneered the concept of inbound marketing and uses itself as proof that content-based marketing is more effective and more efficient than traditional outbound techniques.

For the content team at HubSpot, content is created with lead generation in mind. Typical blog posts contain a call-to-action for an offer that is put behind a registration gate. The offers generate leads, which are passed to sales.

HubSpot is a data-driven company, and the blog is no exception. The content team has a full-time analyst who monitors blog traffic, lead generation figures and other metrics, and creates a monthly report.

The content team reports to marketing. Marketing has a "service level agreement," or SLA, with the sales department, under which marketing promises to deliver a certain number of leads each month.

The blog is modeled after a newspaper, with four "channels" or sections -- Marketing, Sales, Insiders, Opinion -- each led by an editor, aka a "directly responsible individual," or DRI, in HubSpot parlance. The main Marketing blog is structured like a newsroom, with a managing editor, a writer, and a copy editor.

Posts come from executives inside HubSpot, as well as outside contributors, including reseller partners and well-known "influencers" like Guy Kawasaki. Each channel creates content aimed at HubSpot's various customer personas: marketing practitioners, salespeople, resellers, and CMOs.

Traditional newsrooms are hierarchical, command-and-control organizations. They have to be, because otherwise there's no way to put out an entire newspaper every 24 hours, or a new version of Time magazine every week. There's not as much collaboration as in other companies, and not as much emphasis on developing consensus. Journalists simply don't have the luxury of getting together and trying to build consensus. In a newsroom, what the boss says goes.

The newsroom model is an efficient way to produce content. So as you're creating an in-house media operation it makes sense to emulate this model while adding a few tweaks.

At the top of the newsroom there are two people -- the publisher and the editor-in-chief. The publisher runs the business side of thing, selling ads. The editor-in-chief oversees all editorial.

Below the editor-in-chief is a managing editor. Below the managing editor are section editors -- sports, lifestyle, features, news, local, and so on. Below the section editors are the writers, who also get ranked according to seniority.

Off to the side are copy editors, the great unsung heroes of every newsroom. Copy editors never get a byline, and rarely get any praise, yet they are the last line of defense against errors (or libelous statements) slipping into print.

## MAPPING THIS TO CORPORATE BLOGGING

Corporate newsrooms are more complicated than traditional newsrooms and have different goals. Reporters at a newspaper just write stories that seem interesting, and that they hope will attract readers. A corporate newsroom is representing a brand and ultimately has the goal of improving the company's business.

*Another big difference: newspapers thrive on controversy, and welcome it. Your company probably doesn't.*

In a corporate setting, stories must pass muster not only with an editor, but also with the CMO; the head of content, if there is one; the head of public relations; and the people who manage partnerships and relationships with other companies. In the corporate world, the editorial team functions as a service bureau, serving those stakeholders.

Here are the roles involved:

**THE CMO/PUBLISHER.** The CMO's role is akin to the role of the publisher at a newspaper. Her role is to view the blog in the larger context of the company's overall business and to steer the blog in the direction that best serves the company's needs. In media companies the publisher and editor-in-chief sometimes are equivalent in terms of rank, and both report up to someone else. In a corporate media operation the CMO will be in charge, with final say on the blog.

**PUBLIC RELATIONS.** Sometimes the blog will report up into public relations. The head of PR may review every post before it is published. The blog editor should know which topics will be sensitive and will discuss potentially controversial posts with the PR person even before the posts are written. In case of conflict, the PR person can overrule the blog editor.

**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF.** One person must be in charge and decide which stories will run and which ones won't. The title doesn't matter: managing editor, editor-in-chief, executive editor, or just editor. But you must find the right person. The editor of your blog holds your brand in his or her hands. The editor's role is not only to edit stories that have been written but to review pitches for stories and help writers shape their ideas. She is the voice of the site, and sets the tone and direction.

**WRITER.** If you're a small operation, your blog might be a one-person operation, with an editor who is also the writer. But as you grow, you may want to add writers. You might have employees who want to write for the blog in their spare time. You should not set up a system where you impose quotas on departments to deliver blog posts, only because the content you get will be half-hearted and not very good. You're better off to make one employee a full-time blogger, or hire someone for this role.

**COPY EDITOR.** If you're a small operation, then your editor-in-chief will also do the copy editing. But if you start producing content in volume, you'll need to bring in a copy editor. Newspapers often require copy editor candidates to take an editing test, and to do some sample editing. You may hire a copy editor on a trial basis, for a fixed period, to see how she performs on the job.
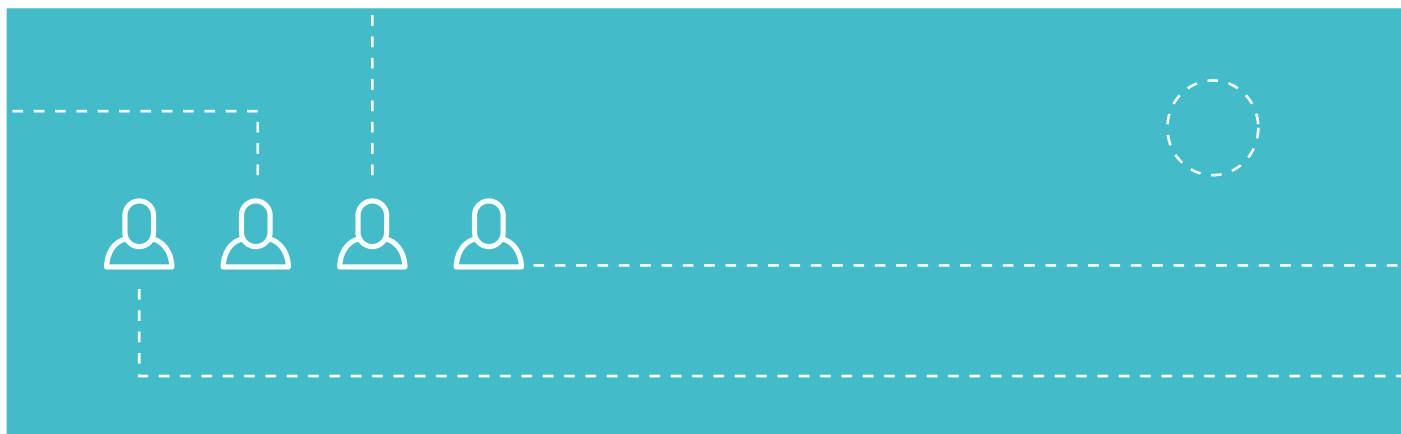
When I worked as a journalist, I had an "imaginary reader." My model was my brother. He's a civil engineer, and he's interested in technology but doesn't follow technology day in and day out. I imagined myself writing for him -- a smart guy who wants a quick summary so he can stay up to speed. My job, as I saw it, was to do the heavy lifting of reporting this stuff out so that I could provide readers with that information.

At HubSpot we do something similar. We have buyer personas that we're selling to. On our blog we write to those same personas. What does a mid-level marketing person want or need to know? What does a CMO find interesting?

Think of the constituencies you need to to address -- customers, employees, the world at large, investors. Put yourself in their shoes, imagine what they might find interesting or useful, and start there.

You also need to think about the opposite question: What should we not write? Are there topics or subjects that are off-limits? Can we write about competitors? In general I think it's a bad idea to bash a rival on your corporate blog. It might be fun, but it could also make you seem petty. Praising a competitor, on the other hand, could be a really smart move.

What about praising your own company? Done well, and selectively, it comes across as charming. Done poorly, or done too often, and it can seem annoying and can even backfire.

What about criticizing our own company? That's when you move into trickier territory, but again, when done well, it can actually help the company. Robert Scoble was one of the first high-profile corporate bloggers. He worked at Microsoft from 2003 to 2006, and made a name for himself by daring to criticize the company.

One example came in 2006, when Microsoft agreed to censor a Chinese blogger at the request of the Chinese government. Scoble made news when he dared to stand up and say: "The behavior of my company in this instance is not right." Scoble's criticism poured fuel on the fire and created a controversy for Microsoft.

Microsoft's PR department and top management probably did not relish the idea of having a Microsoft blogger criticizing Microsoft in public. But the company did not silence Scoble or censor him.

Being willing to accept criticism made Microsoft look stronger, not weaker; better, not worse. It showed that Microsoft knew it was faced with difficult decisions and was willing to be transparent about how it was making those choices.

Many newspapers hire an ombudsman (or "public editor" at the New York Times) whose job is to criticize the paper and call out editors and writers when they make a mistake. Newspapers don't hire ombudsmen because they love the abuse. They do it because being willing to criticize themselves helps establish their credibility.

Of course, corporate blogs are not the same as newspapers. Rules about editorial independence will vary from one company to another. The job of writers and editors is to keep the editorial process honest and perhaps, at times, to stretch limits, as would happen in a traditional news outlet.
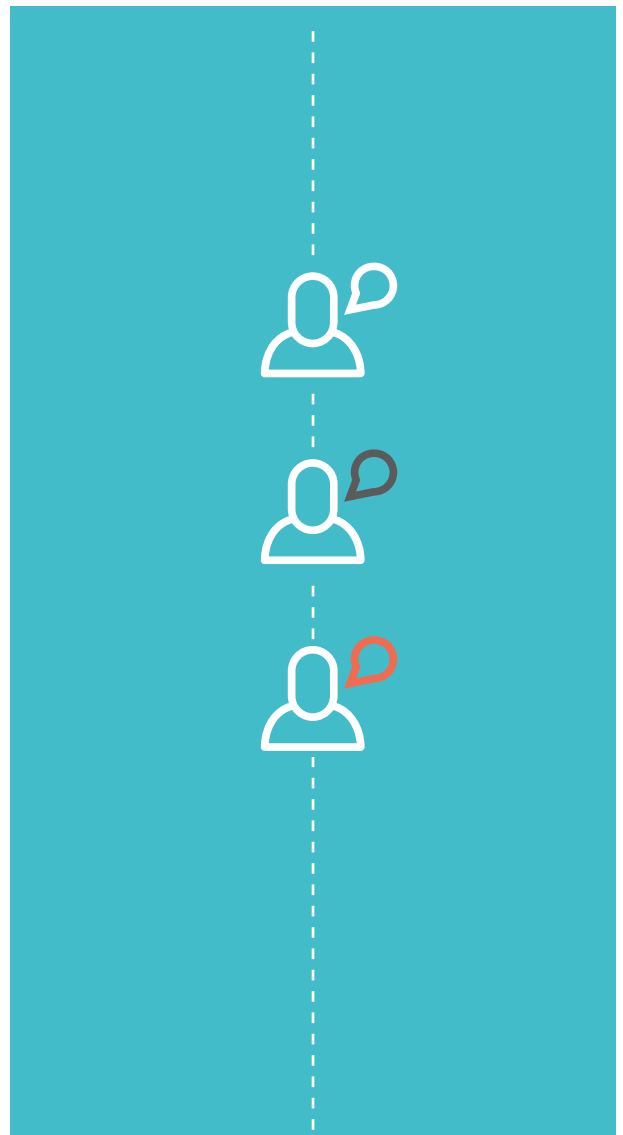
There are some ways in which the corporate journalism and traditional journalism should play by the same rules:

Be transparent. Be honest about who you are and why you're publishing this blog. Sometimes you can't avoid having a conflict of interest. That's fine, but you should disclose it.

Don't write ad copy. You can (and should) write about your company and your products. But there's a way to do this that feels honest and legitimate.

Tell the truth. Ethics are the cornerstone of what you're doing. Just like a newspaper reporter, you should be seeking to tell the truth at all times.

Have an opinion. People respond to content that comes with a point of view. Your point of view is what distinguishes you in the marketplace and defines you to customers.

Admit mistakes. If you goof up, admit it. Express your regret, and apologize. You will be amazed what happens next. Fessing up makes people trust you more. It shows people that you are human -- and honest.

Get people to contribute to your blog. Seek out people I call "megaphones," meaning they have a huge presence on social media. When they write for you, they will promote their article, and your brand will go along for the ride. If you can't get them to write for you, the next best thing is to write about them.

Be promiscuous. Promiscuity is a virtue, at least in the world of publishing. LinkedIn, Huffington Post, Forbes and others have huge audiences of business-savvy people. Try to write for them, or get them to syndicate articles that have already appeared on your blog. Do the same with industry publications from your market space, and the local paper. Your goal is to be in as many places as possible.

Big companies like Intel or GE have deep pockets and can easily afford to build a media operation, and don't necessarily expect to generate sales from their blogs. Small companies are more likely to want to see a return on their investment, something that can be measured.

Those companies should focus on the model in which content generates leads. To keep your budget low, hire a recent graduate from a journalism or communications program, or even an intern from a local university.

Set realistic traffic and conversion goals, and monitor the blog on a daily, weekly and monthly basis. See which posts generate the most pageviews. When you find something that works, double down on that topic, that headline format.

But remember, you're not trying to compete with the Huffington Post. You don't need millions of readers. A corporate blog can have a small audience, but if it's the right audience, that's fine. If you get 1,000 views on a post, you're doing well, especially if you're a small company and just starting out.

Also, be patient. It takes time to build an audience. It may take six months or even a year for your blogging to really kick in.

Journalists aren't like normal people. We are trained to be cynical, skeptical, and critical. We resist collaboration and detest team-building exercises.

*In our world, conflict and controversy are good things.*

Imagine what happens when a journalist goes to work in a corporation, where collaboration and consensus are prized. For a journalist, getting dropped into a corporate setting can be like landing on a different planet -- one where, sometimes, it feels like there's not enough oxygen.

You want to hire a journalist who has shown a knack for creating new initiatives and ideas, and someone who relishes change. Has the reporter ever created her own blog? Does she understand the business model of the publications where she has worked? Does she understand the business model of your company, and how the work she does will fit with the overall goals of the company?

The biggest hurdle you will face as you try to build a corporate publishing operation will be establishing trust with readers. People are naturally skeptical of anything that comes from a brand. Hiring real journalists is one step you can take toward establishing credibility. Letting those journalists behave like real journalists is the next one.

This may mean giving up a little bit of control. And this may be scary. But if you have the right people involved, and they're doing great work, a corporate newsroom can become an enormous asset to your business.

# CONTENT MARKETING C⊕DE of ETHICS

*As a content marketer, brand publisher, or creator producing content on behalf of a corporation, I agree to...*

**1** Adhere to journalism's core values of honesty, integrity, accountability, and responsibility.

**2** Credit all sources of content and ideas.

**3** Ensure that the reader/viewer understands the source, sponsor, and intent of the content.

**4** Disclose all potential conflicts of interest.

**Contently**
contently.com/ethics