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HOW IMPORTANT ARE NAMELESS AND FACELESS COMMENTS?

The Pros and Cons of Anonymous Employee Commenting



*This really *&%\$! sucks! Not only is the product's positioning weak, but all of the information is about features. Where did you get your marketing degree, a Cracker Jack box? – Anonymous*

OR

Instead of only talking about the product's new features, I would have also liked to learn about its benefits. Specifically, how will the updated product help solve customer pain-points? – John Smith, Manager of Operations, Toronto ON

Although this example might seem a little extreme, anonymous and personal online comments are popping up all over the Web—both externally and on intranets. At Ragan, we've been talking regularly about anonymous commenting, and Ragan.com readers can leave anonymous comments.

This free report, produced by Ragan and PollStream, provides insight into the main pros and cons regarding anonymous employee commenting. It also includes observations from active companies that have embraced "Employee Generated Content" for their opinions.

Pros of anonymous employee comments

Posting anonymous comments supports candid dialogue, protects individual opinions, and can increase the number of comments.

- **Candid dialogue:** When an employee can post his or her opinion anonymously, it opens the door to a more candid dialogue. The employee no longer feels that he or she might offend a co-worker or cause problems with management. A candid dialogue can also lead to constructive criticism from the employee about the employer. If you *really* want to know what your employees think, let them post anonymously and you'll find out.
- **Individual opinions:** Anonymous commenting allows employees to be free from fear of retribution. The ability for an employee to post their true feelings or opinions without attaching their personal identity invites an open exchange of opposing views. Employees feel more open to express feeling about issues in the office that bother them or offer opinions that could lead to change.
- **Comment quantity:** When employees are able to post comments anonymously the quantity of comments often increases. Employees are not torn about the formalities of posting a comment that's tied to his or her contact information and will simply comment. As with most outcomes, there is a trade-off between quantity and quality, however, if you're more concerned about increasing active participation, anonymous commenting is the way to go.
- **Whistleblowers:** Companies might find out more than they want through anonymous posting but the good could outweigh the bad in this case. A company policy that welcomes anonymous commenting can also welcome whistleblowers. Someone who knows something that is damaging your company is more likely to come forward about it anonymously than having his or her name attached.

Cons of anonymous employee comments

Posting only those comments that include a commenter's personal information can directly link to the main reasons why employees embrace employee commenting—it supports real-life employee connections, community building, collaboration, recognition, and transparency.

- **Making connections:** In many organizations, employees are often disconnected—scattered across multiple locations, time-zones, departments, and corporate levels. Employee comments that include self-identified information helps the community members connect and make sense of things in their organization. This authentic dialogue and exchange of ideas by self-identified

colleagues puts a stake in the ground and confirms that no employee or organization makes sense in isolation.

- **Community building:** Employee comments that include self-identified information helps build a sense of community among employees. It's great to see employee comments from across various regions and functional areas. Also, Edelman's Trust Survey found that people are three times more likely to trust "average people like me" than senior management.
- **Collaboration and brainstorming:** The conversational and informal nature of employee commenting and the ability to encourage audience feedback is a great way to table ideas and see if they generate interest. Comments raise issues that might not otherwise get attention, and personalization adds a real voice to the discussion. This is a great feature to support internal ambassador programs—identified mentors and connectors collaborating online.
- **Recognition:** "It's all about ME!" Employees have the opportunity to voice their opinions to all levels and are empowered to position themselves as thought leaders. Encouraging employees to include self-identified information further democratizes the communications environment. Everyone has a chance to voice their opinions and they'll be recognized for it. This is a great way to uncover hidden talent among your employees.
- **Form of moderation:** Not from a "big brother" is watching perspective, but to ensure that employees are spending their time reading well thought out comments. As communicators, we spend a lot of time and money developing meaningful content. As employee comments create dialogue (tapping into the truly social element of online social media), requesting self-identified information ensures that comments are as meaningful as the posted content.

The verdict still seems to be out regarding anonymity tied to Employee Generated Content. Hopefully, the results of our POLLarized poll will help shed some more light on the topic. Until then, employee commenting invariably depends upon an organization's culture and its experiences with online employee commenting.

What should be clear to organizations is that simply uploading an article, podcast or video on your site is not enough. If employees expect to voice their opinions and dialogue with your company online—and most employees do—it's important for communication professionals to introduce the online elements that truly drive adoption and success: collaboration, decentralization and interaction, and authentic two-way dialogue.

There are many companies that are already harnessing the power of Employee Generated Content. Here's what a couple of them have to say about anonymity and their approach:

- "We don't allow anonymous comments for three reasons: First, a key purpose of our blog is to create a sense of community; we need real names and real people to accomplish that. Second, employees are held to the same conduct standards in the blog as they are in any other forum at ING; anonymity is more likely to encourage a comment that's inappropriate. Finally, we want to encourage trust and openness. To post a potentially unpopular or controversial comment anonymously doesn't require any trust. However, a similar, signed comment stated in a frank but productive way supports the open and honest environment we want here at ING. We realize that allowing anonymity might result in more comments, and perhaps an even more frank discussion, but we feel like we'd lose a lot of the value the blog brings to our organization if the discussions are led by nameless, faceless individuals." – Adena Puchalski, Director, Internal Communications, ING Insurance Americas
- "I think of my company as a microcosm of society. I understand that companies are not democracies, but they consist of people living by a set of rules. And in society, a free press acts as a critical check to those in power. A shield of anonymity is a powerful force to keep power in check. To those who worry about inappropriate speech, I counter with the common refrain that the best antidote to bad speech is more speech." – Anonymous

- “At its best, anonymous employee commenting allows for a more candid, more authentic dialogue. The benefit is moving away from the restrictive confines of static corporate communications standards and pushing the envelope so that communicators are compelled to examine, and hopefully improve upon, these standards.” - Joel Krauss, Associate Vice President, Retail Communications, National City Bank
- “My company’s communications program supports employees all over the world. We introduced commenting to satisfy our employees' expectations to voice their opinions and build communities. Our intranet is the one place that we can all come together to share ideas, opinions, and praise. Even though we do allow, and value anonymous comments, we DO NOT publish them for all to see. Our intention is to reward those employees that want the recognition. It's about promoting dialogue and connections between real people with real names.” - Anonymous

So, which quote means more to you?

Don't forget to check out the “Anonymous Commenting” and “Employee Generated Content” dialogue that's occurring right now on MyRagan. Please click **HERE** to collaborate with your peers.

About PollStream: PollStream is a leading provider of interactive engagement and community building solutions for Fortune 1000 organizations. By harnessing the power of Employee Generated Content, PollStream's proprietary poll, quiz, commenting, rating and The Hive solutions engage, educate and inform employees online. For more information, please visit: www.pollstream.com.