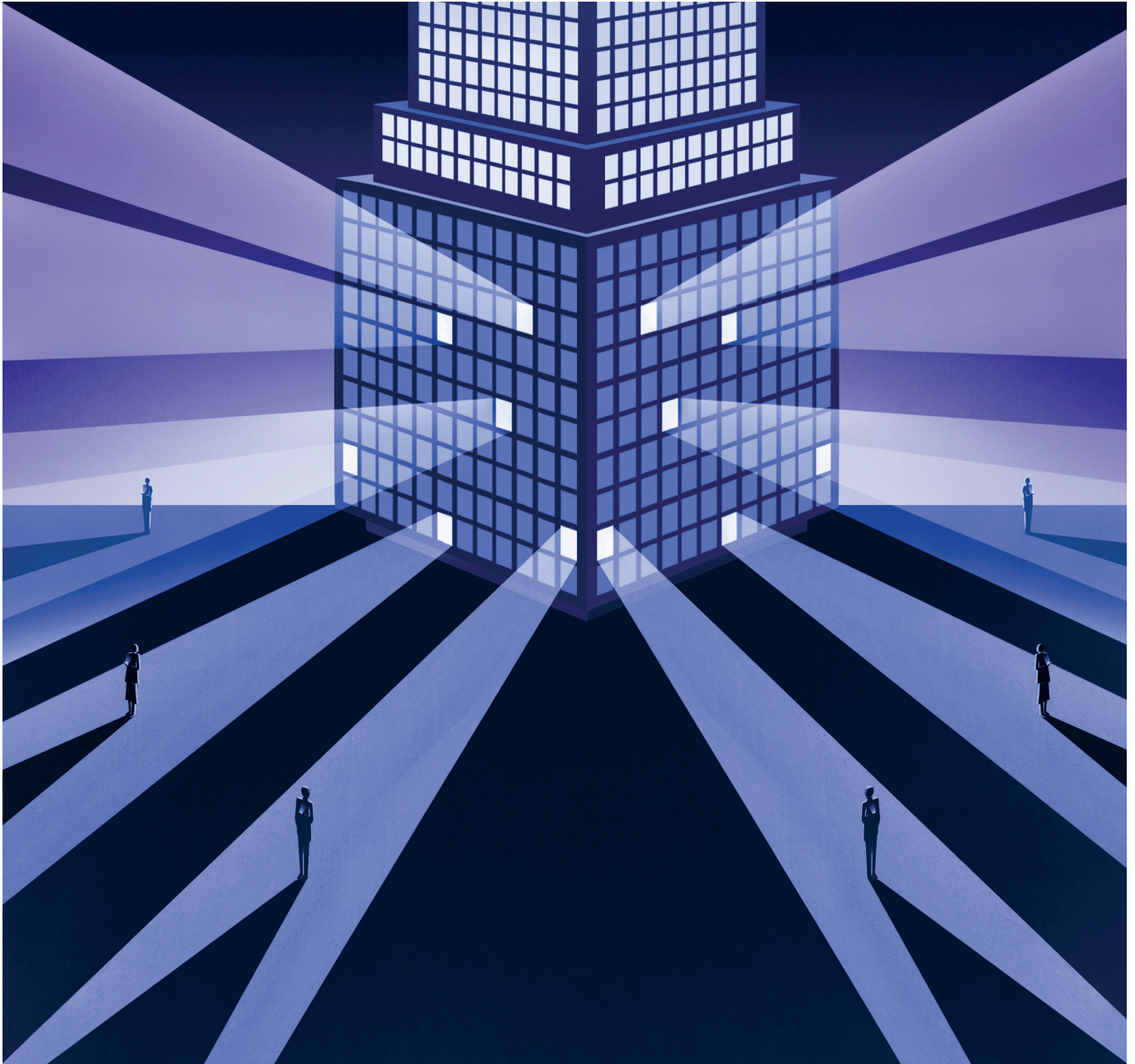


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Employee advocacy

BY ANDREW GRILL. ILLUSTRATION BY MATT MURPHY

Employees who go off script can threaten brand messaging, but they can also open the gateway to authentic and far-reaching advocacy

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uring the two years before I joined IBM Social Consulting, I was CEO of Kred, the social media influencer-ranking

platform. It gave me a unique view of the psychology of social media 'influencers' – and, yes, the quotation marks are deliberate.

With the move from a small start-up to a large multinational in 2015 came a lightbulb moment: I realised we had thousands of influencers within the company and we were already paying them. They were called employees.

Wayward employees can strike fear into the heart of any communications director. A single misdirected tweet could scupper carefully laid messaging plans. However, advocacy can be a way to place well-written content among new and relevant audiences.

I am now asked about employee advocacy on an almost weekly basis. In the case of those within a company who already have an online following of several thousand people, the nervous question remains: should we ask our employees to retweet the messages the comms team sends out?

Although it may be that you put the CEO forward for TV appearances and keynotes, properly trained employees lower down the pecking order may have an even greater impact. The key to managing the risk is to have an integrated strategy across all platforms.

Employees may hesitate before simply reposting the company line. Those experienced with social media already know the value of their personal brand, and the smart ones will seek to protect it. Therefore, encourage them to think like a blogger and understand the insight they can bring to a discussion.

The benefit of this is increased reach. By adding personal points of view (with all the usual disclaimers), employees are more likely to have their content distributed among their network and their unique contributions reflected upon as those of someone closely connected to the subject.

You can still shape this exposure. Just as communications teams treat bloggers and influencers like they treat the press – getting to know them personally, and

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inviting them to briefings and product launches – they should identify those in their own company who could play the role of ambassadors.

Smart public relations teams are already adding their own advocates to their mailing lists, and sending these hand-picked individuals embargoed news with the company narrative, as well as exclusive assets that they can use to frame the story in their own voice and in the language of their community.

SPREAD THE WORD

Once you have recrafted your communication strategy to include employee advocates, you then need a way to get their messages out beyond just the existing channels, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter.

You need to have some owned media where you can place content created by your advocates (and paid and organic influencers) alongside your own content, as well as that from trusted industry sources.

One way of encouraging participation from your own employees is to aggregate content in one place and

promote it as the go-to place for the industry on this subject. Internal advocates can even start to compete to have their content featured on such sites, increasing their own reach.

Companies such as NewsCred allow you to mix licensed content (from respected news hubs such as Forbes, Inc and CNN) alongside thought leadership from employees on the same content hub. Great examples of existing content hubs include Visa Vision and IBM's own THINK Marketing.

Employee advocacy is likely to unnerve a board mindful of privacy and reputational issues. To support the growth of the strategy, you need a way of measuring success that convinces those higher up of the unique value this new channel can bring.

Although it would be impossible to connect all of the social media accounts to your company (to understand the metrics of the interactions), the next best method is to have your own tool that collects relevant and approved content that can be shared by your employees. If they use your platform to share this content (and even add their own angle), then you will be able to measure the impact.

For those staff more comfortable using their own brand and channels, coordinating with them to measure link clicks, website stats and other metrics, such as shares and retweets, can evolve into a great collaboration.

There are already a number of employee-advocate platforms; one vendor I spoke to suggested that upwards of 200 exist. Integration into internal systems over time is key for success with any digital or social tool. Platforms I have come across include Dynamic Signal, Smarp, Passle, Traptit and LinkedIn's own Elevate. All of these platforms will have similar features.

By encouraging, rather than restricting, employee advocacy, you have a means to shape, monitor and benefit from it.

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