



## The Value of Authenticity: Managing Bloggers' Perceptions of the CEO

Bloggers' perceptions of a CEO's authenticity play a critical role in their overall assessment of a CEO's ability and performance, according to our recent study of 10 prominent institutional bloggers who cover corporate/business news for top-tier national, regional, and trade news outlets.

CEOs perceived as inauthentic by bloggers are not only less likeable than authentic CEOs, but also thought to be less capable and less effective leaders, the study reveals.

We have isolated 10 CEO statements/actions that raise concerns about a CEO's authenticity, and identified ways that CEOs can provide credible evidence of their authenticity to the blogger community, based on the study's findings.

### Red-Flags: 10 CEO Statements/Actions That Are Not Authentic

When assessing a CEO's authenticity, bloggers are on high alert for any indication that a CEO is out-of-touch with average employees and consumers. The following are seen as signs that a CEO is *tone deaf* in the current economic climate.

**1. Insufficient nod to mistakes corporate America has made over the last several years.**

Bloggers would like for CEOs – particularly those in the financial sector – to explicitly acknowledge the corporate excesses of the last several years, even if the CEO's company bears little or no direct responsibility for what has happened. *"It would be great to just hear someone say that things need to change."*

**2. Failure to address the perceived disconnect between the availability of corporate resources and executive compensation.**

Almost any CEO statement regarding a shortage of financial resources for company initiatives or employees (e.g., raises, benefits) is viewed with skepticism – especially if there is a perception that CEOs are well compensated or receive large bonuses. *"I hate it when they cry poor, and I know they just got a big bonus."*

Bloggers express a universal sentiment that CEOs who display any of the following traits are inauthentic by definition.

**3. Lack of courage.**

Bloggers believe that CEOs are too tightly handled and scripted – and, as a result, too tentative not only in their public statements, but in their actions.

**4. Failure to engage in unscripted give and take.**

Bloggers believe they should have an opportunity – even if only once a year – to ask questions (preferably in-person) and get a glimpse of the real person inside the CEO.

**5. Failure to acknowledge and discuss their company's challenges.**

Bloggers are always on the lookout for potential problems that can undermine the companies they cover. A CEO who is not similarly vigilant is viewed with suspicion.

Part one of a special report  
prepared in collaboration with

the10company



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Bloggers are also sensitive to signs that a CEO is trying to manipulate them. Use of the following phrases only serves to confirm their suspicions.

### 6. ***"This deal is a win-win."***

Whether it's true or not, bloggers believe that few business deals, if any, are really win-win – particularly in the current economic climate. *"What's really win-win these days?"*

### 7. **Thinking/working/planning *"outside the box."***

The phrase is viewed as classic corporate-speak.

*"I hear someone say they are thinking 'outside the box,' and I take that as a really good sign that they aren't."*

### 8. ***"We're not here to talk about the past."***

When CEOs use this phrase it's seen as a clichéd, not-so-clever diversionary tactic designed to avoid an unpleasant topic.

### 9. ***"We are an innovative company."***

Bloggers are adamant that innovation has become an empty promise – something that many companies say they stand for, but few (if any) can actually deliver.

### 10. ***"Executive X is stepping down to spend more time with his family."***

Bloggers believe this phrase has become code for an executive who is being forced out of a job; most likely because of a scandal, an ethics violation, an internal power struggle, or an impending downturn in the company's fortunes.

## How CEOs Can Be Authentic

1. Talk like a real person.
  - Avoid standard corporate-speak – Even one clichéd phrase is too much.
  - Be specific – The more vague, the less authentic.
  - Be accessible – CEOs can't afford to be seen as aloof in today's climate.
  - Tell stories – Bloggers want to understand who the CEO really is; that he or she is a real person.
2. Demonstrate an awareness of tough economic times and sympathy for what average employees and consumers are facing.
  - Display the ability to see employees as real people with problems and stresses. *"These are people working there, not just numbers."*
  - Interact with employees/consumers in a sustained, meaningful way (e.g., weekly lunches, volunteering with them for a cause). Bloggers are wary of flavor-of-the-month initiatives and want to see evidence of a real commitment from the CEO.
  - Highlight the way that substantial company activities help families and the community.
3. Don't be afraid.
  - Face criticism, admit mistakes, and make enemies when necessary. Bloggers long for a CEO with the courage to take some heat.

### A Note on Methodology

This report summary is based on findings from 10 one-on-one in-depth interviews with prominent institutional bloggers who cover corporate and business news for top-tier national, regional, and trade news outlets, conducted in December 2011. Each blogger participated in a 30-45 minute interview designed primarily to assess their views of CEOs and the C-Suite at large public companies.



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4. Be blunt.
  - Bloggers want a CEO to talk and act in a simple, straightforward, and decisive manner. *"Just cut the BS and get to the point – that's authentic."*
5. Get the tone right
  - Given the economic climate, bloggers are much more comfortable with CEOs who convey a strong sense of caution – an acknowledgement of company challenges, a clear respect for the competition, and restrained optimism even when the outlook is good.

### Who's More Authentic?

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CEOs in the financial and banking industry are consistently rated as *less likely* to be authentic. Bloggers' observations of high profile CEOs in these industries (as well as their perceptions of the culture in the financial sector in general) lead them to believe that such CEOs are particularly likely to be *tone deaf* and *scripted*.

The following CEOs were most often seen as authentic.

- Warren Buffett – *"He's a straight shooter."*
- Steve Jobs – *"He was always himself, even if it rubbed people the wrong way."*
- Ray Kroc – *"He wasn't in some Ivory Tower; he was out in the field all the time."*
- Herb Kelleher – *"His door was always open – I think he ate with lunch with his employees every day."*

### About the collaborators

**the 10 company** is a new strategic consultancy, based in New York, dedicated to helping C-Suite executives transform their businesses through authentic, results-driven marketing and communications. The 10 brand is backed by the 10 Tenets of Client Relationships, 10% Performance Pricing and a 10% Reinvestment Promise. For more information, visit [www.the10company.com](http://www.the10company.com)

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