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A blog reveals the mind of Sun

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On April 1, Jonathan Schwartz, president of Sun Microsystems, had a disappointing message for readers of his web log. "The downside of being an officer of a public corporation is that it's very difficult to write a good April Fools' blog without feeling the need for serious engagement from the corporate legal team," he wrote.

That encapsulated the difficulty for the generation of corporate leaders now trying to communicate with employees and others - from competitors to suppliers and analysts - through blogs. Mr Schwartz and Bob Lutz, vice-chairman of General Motors, are the most prominent examples of those engaging with the outside world directly rather than relying on speeches and official announcements.

It is not easy. Blogs live or die by being spontaneous and genuine. Those that are not may be attacked by others, or wither away. A company executive who pushes his own products loses his credibility. But directors of public companies are also bound by many rules and responsibilities and cannot always say what they think, when they think it.

For 39-year-old Mr Schwartz, who has written Jonathan's Blog (<http://blogs.sun.com/jonathan>) since last June, the problem is exemplified by Regulation FD, the US securities market rule that requires corporations to release market-sensitive information to all investors at the same time through stock exchange announcements, or accredited news agencies such as Reuters and Bloomberg.

That means Mr Schwartz has to be careful not to say anything on his blog about Sun's finances or its strategy that might prompt an investor to buy or sell the technology company's shares. Every so often, he consults Sun's lawyers to ensure he does not cross the line.

"The part that is really bizarre is that I am not accredited," he says. "I mean, how weird is that? Straight from the horse's mouth is not considered legitimate."

He is also more selective than the average blogger about how much he publishes. He made only five entries in March, for example. "For every blog I post, there are probably another 10 that I write but do not post. That is the one thing that is different. I have to speak on behalf of 32,000 people and I do have to be careful. I don't say 'hate that guy' or 'That journalist is a nutball'. That would probably not serve me well."

But Mr Schwartz is not deterred. His blog has become the most popular of the 1,000-odd employee blogs that Sun hosts, with everyone from software writers to marketing executives weighing in with personal reflections and thoughts about the business. He gets 30,000 readers a day for his thoughts on technology, which are interspersed with some lively attacks on competitors such as Red Hat and Hewlett-Packard.

Charlene Li, a principal analyst at Forrester Research, says Mr Schwartz operates prudently, given his responsibilities. "Any corporate executive has to be careful about what they say. If he feels the need to check and self-censor himself sometimes, that is appropriate," she says. But she believes Mr Schwartz's personality still emerges in his blog more effectively than it might at a controlled press or analysts' event.

Mr Schwartz says he cannot simply try to put over the company's latest message. "If marketing was the priority, nobody would read it. They would just stop because there is plenty of that in the world. Fundamentally, everything I write has to be authentic. If it is not, I delete it. It looks so stupid. I would get trashed very quickly," he says.

So what is the priority? Mr Schwartz, who works under Scott McNealy, Sun's long-time chief executive, says that a blog enables him to communicate quickly and directly with many audiences. It is also cheap. "It has become a very transparent way of conveying what Sun is thinking. Why would you want to do something less efficient that involves more people and way more money?" he says.

For Mr Schwartz, it helps considerably with one of the most important parts of his job. "Any CEO who says a blog would take too much time is deluding himself because the number one imperative of any senior executive is communication. How much of our time will you spend on analysis? A very small amount. Decision-making is difficult but it tends not to be time-consuming."

Still, it probably comes more naturally to Mr Schwartz than others. He is known for being outspoken and iconoclastic - as well as for keeping his hair in a ponytail. He was also drawn by the fact that so many others at Sun were blogging. That is a trend at other technology companies: Microsoft has many bloggers, including Robert Scobie, a "software evangelist" whose Scobleizer blog is very popular.

Sun also has a lot to explain. The company's past focus on proprietary operating system software - notably its Solaris version of Unix - meant it was caught by the rise in Linux, the open source operating system. It has responded by allowing the latest version of Solaris to be downloaded free, an opportunity that has been taken up by 1m companies and people. But there are still doubts among many analysts over where its revenues will now come from.

Mr Schwartz has devoted a lot of space on his blog to trying to explain Sun's new approach. This is partly out of frustration at how Sun's message is mediated.

"Sometimes, I see an industry analyst saying here is Sun's strategy and I think 'Oh my God, either we have done a poor job of communicating or they are biased against us'. Rather than having someone else interpret it, I will just write it down."

Mr Schwartz, who has two small children, says he drafts entries for his blog "when I'm on aircraft or my baby is not sleeping, or it's been a tough day. I will unwind with musings about one issue or another. It has become no different to e-mail or making a speech. The idea that a senior executive could do their job without a blog is like saying they could do it without e-mail. I'm sure they could, but they would be less effective."

He says he has enough readers to repay the effort. "I am much more interested in quality than quantity. When I go to a Wall Street analysts' event and ask, 'Which of you reads my blog?' half the room raises its hand. I would rather have those 50 than 500,000 people from Slashdot [a technology community site] who want to comment on my haircut or my wardrobe."


Above all, he likes reaching an audience directly. "If my readership in a month is greater than Computer World, why would I advertise through them? If I can capture their readership and ensure the content is faithful to what I think, why would I want to have one of them interpret it for me? I am humble enough to know my voice will never rise above the FT or The Wall Street Journal but will it rise above Slashdot? Yeah, it already has."

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