

*Communication in today's multichannel world is complex. Criticaleye speaks to **Laura Haynes**, Chairman of brand consultancy Appetite, about how companies can use social media to connect with key stakeholders*

Yes, but you have a responsibility as a leader to communicate in a way that is a positive reflection of yourself and your brand. A company's brand image is linked to its leaders. The challenge comes if it's too corporate ►

or promotional, or if it is clearly written by your PR team as spin.

A survey on social media and the C-Suite [by Brandfog] suggested that consistent, C-Suite social media engagement about broad management themes will not only establish individuals as thought leaders, but can also have an impact on people's view of the brand and its long-term success.

### Why should companies use social media to communicate with stakeholders?

The whole world of communication has changed. It's no longer about broadcasting messages. There is an increasing demand for transparency, authenticity and for people to be able to connect with companies and brands in a deeper way.

However, it is increasingly challenging to reach customers and other stakeholders. This is actually partly due to the enormous number of channels now available.

The trick is to go to where your audience is. Many companies are turning to social networking sites to open new and deeper lines of communication.

### What are the advantages?

When done well, it allows the company to be proactive in its communications and establish trust with key stakeholders.

It's about trying to engage and develop two-way conversations, both to put a point of view across and to seek stakeholder perspectives. Then it's about being able to internalise these within the organisation and respond in a positive way.

*“Businesses are trying to build trust and create more approachable brands”*

### How are companies engaging with stakeholders?

Businesses are trying to build trust and create more approachable brands, [because] there's nothing worse than a faceless corporation. It provides an opportunity to speak directly to stakeholders using the voices within the company.

Equally, it allows companies to engage and monitor conversations about their brands, to understand concerns and prevent potential reputation crises.

Internally, organisations are also using it to engage employees, to communicate values, create a strong sense of community and ensure that the culture grows and develops.

### Which companies are using social media well?

There are a number in the B2C space. For example, Nike and Starbucks both use it well. In the automotive industry, Mini has an interactive social media approach. In B2B, there are some that are beginning to use social media, for instance Cisco Systems and UBS.

All of these companies are using social media as an engagement tool. Each has established a strong sense of identity through its communications – their messages are clear, and most importantly, they listen, engage and regularly respond to feedback.

### How can other companies replicate their success?

Start with a clear strategy and put in place the right resources to execute it. Ensure you have established your brand identity so that you communicate effectively. It has to be real – don't just use it as a place for press releases or see it as something you can just dip in and out of.

Leaders also need to ask themselves why they want to use social media. The answers could vary from testing an idea or communicating thought leadership, to starting a discussion about important issues or enhancing reputation. ■

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**Laura Haynes**  
Chairman  
Appetite

*Laura is the founder and Chairman of brand consultancy Appetite. Her expertise lies in helping organisations embrace change and enhance image through strategic planning, brand purpose and innovation. Laura is also actively involved in a number of key social enterprises, community and arts organisations, and is Board Director for U.N. Women and a member of the Parliamentary Design Commission.*

Contact Laura through:  
[www.criticaleye.net](http://www.criticaleye.net)