

Why You Need An Executive Style Guide

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Whether you are in a new role with a new organization being told they have always done it *that way*, or in a well-established position knowing what *that way* is, a style guide can make your life as a communicator significantly easier. Beyond spelling out *that way*, it has the power to foster clarity, relevancy and consistency, set the right tone, promote the right messages and eliminate buzzwords, saving time and money, and ensuring the brand is accurately represented.

But have you considered how much an *executive* style guide could help you when it comes to communicating on behalf of various senior leaders within your organization? While most style guides cover logos, graphics, colors, typography, written and illustrated content, as well as the brand itself – its roots, purpose, platform, character and ambitions – an executive style guide can do much of the same *and* achieve a similar impact for your leadership communications.

Why it matters

The global pandemic has not only challenged internal communicators to build meaningful connections and create a sense of belonging while being apart, it also changed internal communications itself for the better, especially on the executive side. In addition to turning up the HEAT – to communicate with humanity, empathy, accountability and transparency – it brought forward a need for a friendlier tone and a more relaxed, personal style from leaders.

As a result, communicators today need to know and understand

their internal customers better than ever because post-pandemic, we are expected not only to move beyond the corporate speak that characterized many large enterprises in the past, but to help leaders continue to progress executive communications and improve their visibility across all channels in order to strengthen employee engagement, promote psychological safety and build trust.

Where to begin

The same way a brand is a result of the thoughts, feelings and emotional connections it evokes in those who encounter it, a *personal brand* also needs to be reflective of the perceived personality, perspectives and preferences of the executives you support. What are their priorities? How do they like to communicate? What are their strengths as a communicator? What channels and tools best fit their personality? And, equally important, how can you best support their needs?

You must be prepared to act as a trusted advisor and offer guidance as needed. And, while it's important for you to know the answers to these questions, they will especially come in handy whenever someone else on your internal team or external resources need to partner with your executives. So, treat the insights you have gathered about each leader with the same care you would any sensitive information, and carefully consolidate them into easy-to-use lists.

The 'what'

Your existing corporate style guide should already cover the basics around general writing principles, such as capitalization, punctuation, abbreviations, numbers, dates, as well as (ideally) a list of words and phrases that represent the brand most accurately. Create individual executive sections by adding a list of each key leader's priorities, messages, as well as words and phrases that their organization needs to and/or they personally like to use.

The *what* should include:

- Each executive's priorities and key messages clearly linked to the enterprise vision and laddering up to companywide messaging
- Proper names for businesses, functions, regions, products, services, metrics, programs, initiatives, etc. within each executive's organization
- Commonly used organizational phrases, taglines, abbreviations and acronyms – along with any jargon that should *never* be used – for each executive
- The executive's personal preferences for words and phrases (e.g., organization vs. team, colleagues vs. teammates, priorities vs. focus areas, etc.)

The 'how'

The *how* is more difficult – and, of course, at least as important – to cover. It includes all the subjective, intangible logistics around executive content, from tone through style to length and complexity. Whenever you are planning a new communication and/or communicating on behalf of a new executive, these details will save time during the review process.

Post-pandemic, the tone of executive communications is generally less formal, the style is less direct, while the sentence structure is simpler and shorter. Although you may offer guidance on how to adopt this new normal, you must also ensure you capture the unique personality of each executive. Make a note of their evident communications habits when it comes to sounding particularly innovative, colorful, optimistic, energetic, educational, candid, uplifting, etc.

To maximize effectiveness, all style guides should be living, breathing documents that are continually updated to reflect any new or transformed elements that have become important to your organization and/or your executives. They should be

digital and searchable, easy to access and use, and available to everyone working in a creative or content-focused role to ensure clarity, relevancy and consistency for employee and executive communications.



About the Author: *Orsi supports content creation and content strategy for high-profile corporate, consumer and cause clients of Red Havas – and she could not be happier. Her specialties include writing, editing, ghostwriting, blogging, marketing, digital/social and experiential, all*

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