

White Paper

# Engaging CEOs: The Fast Track to Opportunity

*6 strategies to get CEOs' attention and shape their views*

Chief Executive



This is the second of two Executive Briefs exploring CEOs' dramatically increasing role and influence in enterprise investment/purchase decisions. The first focused on why and how modern CEOs are increasing their influence; here we focus on optimal ways to engage with CEOs. Both draw directly from extensive research and the experiences of successful CEOs and the brands and marketers who target them.

“In a focused hour, I can become well informed on just about anything,” says Ed Taylor, CEO of The Collective Group, a professional services firm. “The increased availability of relatively good information makes it possible for an energetic CEO to develop a well-informed opinion about whatever comes along to impact the business,” he adds.

Like everyone else, today’s chief executives have extraordinary access to high-value information from a growing multitude of credible sources. Whether discovered directly or screened and filtered by teams, this is enabling CEOs to “step up” to the rapid changes sweeping their industries by getting more involved in, and wielding more influence over, investment/purchase decisions at all levels of their organizations.

Although conventional marketing wisdom holds that CEOs are “above” downloading white papers, attending conferences, reading email newsletters, or other information-gathering techniques, a growing body of research and anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. Why?

As Taylor suggests, it is on CEOs’ shoulders that the responsibility falls to identify signs of change to which their organizations must respond. In fact, 96% of nearly 500 CEOs surveyed by Chief Executive Group (CEG) say their role in being “watchful” for significant needs or opportunities throughout their organizations is “important,” “very important” or “primary.”

“If the recession taught us anything, it’s that you can’t get comfortable. The pace of change is dramatic, and when you’re getting comfortable that’s when you’re most likely to get blindsided,” says Tom Saporito, CEO of RHR International, a firm of management psychologists and consultants who focus on CEO needs.

These CEO behaviors lead to an important opportunity for brand marketers to provide content that helps inform CEOs – and shapes their views. This brief explores six strategies for marketers to engage CEOs, including the content formats CEOs gravitate toward, the benefits they’re looking for and the topics that grab their attention – both “evergreen” (i.e., recurring) topics and what concerns CEOs today.

## **1: TOTAL FOCUS ON BENEFITS FOR THE CEO**

This sounds deceptively simple. But among the biggest challenges for any thought leadership content is to remove your own company’s point of view from the central focus and replace it with that of your target audience. When the target is CEOs, this challenge becomes paramount.

“Regardless of topic or format, the goal of any content directed at CEOs must be to improve their effectiveness, or that of the organizations they lead,” advises Marshall Cooper, CEO of CEG, publisher of *Chief Executive* magazine and owner of the Chief Executive Network, a CEO peer-to-peer network.

Cooper believes that means any form of marketing contact with CEOs must provide one or more of the following high-level benefits:

- Helping CEOs be more effective
- Making their companies more profitable
- Providing insight on future growth opportunities

CEOs interviewed for this paper agreed that they often look for thought leadership content that rolls up to one of these three benefits, as Taylor’s and Saporito’s comments above allude.

Malcolm Conner, President of American Water Resources, adds, “I’m constantly watching our industry and our competitors, looking for opportunities to provide innovations, or for unmet customer needs that can lead to new products and services. In other words, opportunities to grow our top line and enhance our margins.”

## **2: UNIQUE POINTS OF VIEW ON CRUCIAL ISSUES**

Marketers targeting CEOs agree that the key to getting a CEO’s attention is to wrap up those benefits in unique, highly-valuable information about the issues they wrestle with. That often means staking a clear – perhaps even provocative – position on a critical issue.

## PRESTIGIOUS PROXIES

Not all companies are in the business to understand CEOs and help them be more effective. But that doesn't mean they can't associate their brands with thought leadership, focusing on one or more key CEO benefits. Ariba CMO Rachel Spasser uses a tactic of leveraging prestige thought leadership sources. "We've used materials from McKinsey, and a big data paper written by a professor from Harvard University," Spasser explains. "We feel that the validity of the source, and teaching something the CEO may not know, is a great way to really reach the CEO audience."

"What's most effective in engaging CEOs' attention is to bring a different point of view to those issues that are truly unique to CEOs," says Saporito. Among the issues RHR concentrates on are CEO succession; shaping teams out of senior executives' differing agendas and personalities; and obtaining the senior-team alignment necessary to drive major strategic initiatives. What it all adds up to for CEOs is thought leadership on leading change, and making it meaningful for their organizations and their senior teams.

"Our long-term experience with CEOs shows they are continuously reviewing and re-assessing strategy in changing markets; exploring leadership issues, such as how to lead change and how to better motivate and incentivize employees; managing the sales force; and operational efficiency," notes Wayne Cooper, Executive Chairman and President of CEG. These issues continually recur for CEOs.

He also points out that there are a host of issues that are both top-of-mind for CEOs and of-the-moment, given the current fast-changing business environment. Right now, these include health care reform, big data analytics, mobility, emerging markets, energy markets, social media and cloud computing.

"For a CEO, what's crucial about each of these topics is how it affects their company's strategy or business model," says Cooper. "For example, big data is popping up right now because a lot of

industries are not sure how it affects them. In terms of mobility, CEOs are trying to understand what it really means to have a mobile workforce and mobile customers, and are rethinking channel strategy as more and more goods are bought online – and now through mobile. And as the domestic cost of energy drops, entire industries are rethinking their transportation and production strategies,” Cooper explains.

Howard Kravitz, U.S. Marketing Leader for professional services firm PwC, adds: “Risk resiliency is a huge theme right now, as is supply chain, customer focus, and operational efficiency. These are all places where CEOs will have to invest in technology to enhance their competitiveness.”

Ariba, Inc., the U.S. subsidiary of SAP that provides procurement software and a global online collaboration network for supply chain partners, has recently focused on big data in its thought leadership for CEOs. “We want to help CEOs demystify big data, and very specifically show how companies are using data analytics to make better decisions, and are looking at data as a way to help direct their activities going forward,” says Rachel Spasser, Ariba’s Senior Vice President and Chief Marketing Officer.

### 3: BUILD FOR SPEED TO MAKE A FAST IMPRESSION

When it comes to CEOs, marketers interviewed for this paper couldn’t emphasize enough the need for speed. In this context, that means distilling content down to its essence and using design to ensure key takeaways are obvious and easy to absorb rapidly.

The cover of a recent PwC "10Minutes" brief. The title is "Investing in China's private healthcare system". It features several sections: "Highlights" (Reform in China will expand healthcare for citizens and allow foreign investors a bigger role to play; Since the public health sector lacks some critical resources, private money can play a big part; Five growth areas in the market are especially ripe for entry; Successful strategies include choosing the right local partners and markets); "China's reformed health sector" (Positioned to prosper: In the past 30 years, China has gone from an exclusively government-run public healthcare system to one that is decentralized and open to private and foreign investment); and "April 2013". The PwC logo is at the bottom left.

“Time management is very challenging,” notes American Water’s Conner.

“Things that are more efficient will be top-of-mind. Things that summarize the key value for me in a concise way will be much more attractive,” Conner says.

PwC’s Kravitz notes that the need for speed was behind the company’s development of its “10Minutes” content series several years ago.

*The cover of a recent PwC “10Minutes” brief.*

“Yes, CEOs will still get into long-form white papers, but in today’s world the first touch has to be found fast, organized simply, and done with quickly,” says Kravitz.

Each 10Minutes piece follows the same template. They are generally six horizontally laid out content pages (not counting end notes), with four key takeaways highlighted on the cover – which is where the text actually starts. “If I’m a CEO, the 10Minutes piece is designed to give me insight into a topic, validate my thinking, crystalize the questions I want to ask. Then, if I want more information, it can drive me to other sources – or I might call the thought leaders identified at the end,” Kravitz says.

The pieces are so effective that PwC continues to expand the program. For example, nine were produced in 2011, 14 in 2012 and 2013 is on track to top that.

RHR International addresses the need for speed by providing its insights at multiple levels of depth, according to CMO Jeff Durocher. “Every year, we do original research to find out what’s on the minds of CEOs, and we track what changes from year to year. We produce a six-page detailed summary of that research – and also a 500-word blog post, an 800-word newsletter entry, and tweets and LinkedIn posts on all of the above.”

For years, RHR has published books on crucial topics, such as its current *Inside CEO Succession*. “But today, we also produce eBooks, each one of which may summarize just one chapter of the larger book. We spoon-feed it so it’s bite size, not a book,” explains Durocher.

#### **4: FACE-TO-FACE: CONFERENCES & ROUNDTABLES**

Gathering CEOs together in one place is a major challenge. But in terms of format, it’s the unanimous first choice of senior marketers targeting CEOs.

The essential element necessary to make conferences, roundtables and dinner meetings work is also unanimous: other CEOs. “Only CEOs can provide the best insight for CEOs,” is how one CEO put it.

“CEOs prefer learning from each other,” confirms PwC’s Kravitz.

“Participating in the events hosted by *Chief Executive* is one of our ‘franchise’ CEO marketing approaches,” says RHR’s Durocher. “We’re part of their selection committee for CEO of the Year,” he adds.

“Live events, where a vendor can show their expertise, or show how they solve a problem, are definitely optimal,” says CEG’s Wayne Cooper. “There’s nothing more powerful than being there in person and explaining it, CEO to CEO,” he adds. That’s why, Cooper says, he always encourages marketers to obtain their CEOs’ commitment to attend such events.

In addition, “A lot of our CEOs enjoy our roundtables,” he says. “They don’t mind that they’re sponsored, because they know they will be engaging with a group of peers around a topic of mutual interest.”

“Virtual” live events also are popular among CEOs – Cooper says CEG’s webinars are well attended. Recently, for example, CEG held a webinar sponsored by Human Synergistics, a pioneer in quantifying organizational development concepts; it was entitled *How to Transform Your Leadership and Organization to Drive Bottom-Line Revenues* and it attracted nearly 300 registrants from among Chief Executive subscribers.

## 5: THE ONGOING POWER OF TEXT: WHITE PAPERS & EMAIL

When warranted, CEOs will also opt for so-called “long form” white papers.

In CEG research, for example, 49% of the nearly 500 CEOs surveyed say they download white papers. “Recently, when I needed to get smart about VCE [virtualized computing environments], the first thing I did was download a white paper,” says Collective Group’s Taylor. “I will absorb branded information to get context, then look at real-company experiences.” Cloud technologies such as VCE are of-the-moment on CEOs’ agendas because of their potential to change a company’s infrastructure investment patterns, according to Wayne Cooper.

But when it comes to white papers, “The rule still applies that CEOs want to meet and learn from other CEOs. So ideally, white papers should be from the voice of CEOs,” CEG’s Marshall Cooper advises.

Of note, a separate survey of more than 350 CEOs found that nearly 60% preferred text when asked to choose one media format.<sup>1</sup> “No preference” was second, followed by infographics, video and podcasts. Another statistic was in perfect alignment with interviewees’ consensus about CEOs’ “need for speed”: 70% of the CEOs said they prefer to scan for key points – they seldom actually “read” anything online.

Perhaps the text orientation and “scannability” of email newsletters is what led 96% of the CEOs to cite them as valuable in their work – including 49% who called them “very valuable.”<sup>2</sup> Confirms Cooper: “When we send emails to *Chief Executive*’s readers, we get excellent CEO response.”

## **6: KEEP AN EYE ON VIDEO AND SOCIAL MEDIA**

Research also demonstrates that CEOs are not heavy users of video or social media. But their video use is growing. And with social media, they’re “getting the message” without direct participation – and it’s influencing their decision-making.

In terms of video, only 8% of the CEOs surveyed named it as their most-preferred online content format. But they’re obviously watching online video because 70% said they’re watching more video in 2013 than they did in 2012.

PwC’s Kravitz provides anecdotal confirmation of those research findings. “I have no empirical evidence that this is a breakthrough moment, but video is clearly emerging as a new way for CEOs to get information fast – in 2-to-3-minute snippets,” says Kravitz. “They watch interviews with other CEOs, or other practitioners.” Kravitz explains that the anecdotal confirmation comes from CEOs who reference PwC videos when following up, for example, at conference meetings.

“Short videos are an excellent way for us marketers to solve the problem we all have today of proving quickly that we’re the ones you should come to if you want more insight,” he notes.

Regarding social media, CEOs are largely absent – but they’re listening. According to PwC’s latest global CEO survey, 53% of U.S. CEOs say social media users influence their business strategy. “CEOs know what the social world is telling them, and their decision-making is being influenced by it,” Kravitz says.

He adds: “CEOs recognize that their stakeholders are using social channels – and whatever channels they choose, CEOs need to use them to be more engaged with those stakeholders.”

## CONCLUSION: LEVERAGE CEO ‘WATCHFULNESS’ TO MAKE YOUR CASE

As the global business environment continues to change rapidly, and in multiple dimensions simultaneously, the growing challenge of identifying the best corporate strategies has made CEOs more open to new information from diverse sources.

Thus, brand marketers now have an excellent opportunity to inform CEOs and help shape their thinking – especially early in an investment/purchase decision process. According to research discussed in the first part of this series, that formative stage is when CEOs are most involved. Second-most is at final approval time.

Those two ends of the purchase process align with the two most tangible goals of thought leadership marketing targeting CEOs, as articulated here by Ariba’s Spasser: “Our ideal outcome is for CEOs to pass the information along to their procurement officers to investigate how our offering can help their company. Second best is for them to equate the Ariba brand with the value of that thought leadership, so they’re familiar and ready to sign off when the procurement officer comes to them with a proposal.”

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

To engage CEOs most effectively, remember to follow these key content strategies:

- Totally focus on benefits for the CEO – not your company
- Provide a unique point of view on issues crucial to the CEO
- Build for speed so your content makes a good impression fast
- Pursue face-to-face opportunities at conferences and roundtables
- Leverage the power of text effectively in white papers and email
- Develop video and social media strategies aligned with CEOs’ growing usage

<sup>1</sup> CEO Information Consumption: How Business Leaders Stay Informed, CEO.com and Domo, Inc., 2013

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

## **ABOUT CHIEF EXECUTIVE GROUP**

Chief Executive Group improves the effectiveness of CEOs and the organizations they lead.

The company publishes *Chief Executive* magazine and ChiefExecutive.net, hosts exclusive events for CEOs to network, learn and share ideas, facilitates industry-specific CEO peer groups through Chief Executive Network and produces proprietary research that gives CEOs unique insights into data and trends that help them effectively lead their organizations. For more information, please visit ChiefExecutive.net or contact Geri FitzGerald, EVP/Publisher, 203-930-9798, [gfitzgerald@chiefexecutive.net](mailto:gfitzgerald@chiefexecutive.net).