A Blogger in Their Midst

by Halley Suitt

Lancaster-Webb’s surgical gloves are flying off the shelves, thanks to the on-line endorsements of an otherwise indiscreet employee. Should the CEO consider her a priceless marketing weapon or a grave security risk?

Will Somerset, the CEO of Lancaster-Webb Medical Supply, a manufacturer of disposable gloves and other medical products, needed time alone to think, and he had hoped an early morning jog would provide it. But even at 6 AM, as he walked out to the edge of the luscious lawn surrounding Disney World’s Swan Hotel, Will had unwanted companions: Mickey and Minnie Mouse were in his line of sight, waving their oversized, gloved hands and grinning at him. Instead of smiling back at the costumed characters, he grimaced. He was about to lose a million-dollar sale and a talented employee, both in the same day.

Will finished his hamstring stretches and began his laps around the grounds, leaving the mice in the dust and recalling events from the day before. Industry conferences are always a little tense, but never to the extent this one had turned out to be. Lancaster-Webb—by far the best-known brand in the medical-disposables arena—was introducing a remarkable nitrile glove at the gathering. Will was good at announcements like this; during his 30-year career, he had probably given more speeches and launched more products at trade conferences than any other chief executive in his field. But attendance at yesterday’s rollout event had been sparse.

Evan Jones, vice president of marketing at Lancaster-Webb, had guaranteed the appearance of a big sales prospect, Samuel Taylor, medical director of the

HBR’s cases, which are fictional, present common managerial dilemmas and offer concrete solutions from experts.
Houston Clinic. Will knew that impressing Taylor could mean a million-dollar sale for Lancaster-Webb. But before the presentation, Evan was nervously checking his shiny Rolex, as if by doing so he could make Sam Taylor materialize in one of the empty seats in the Pelican room. At five minutes to show time, only about 15 conference-goers had shown up to hear Will, and Taylor was nowhere in sight.

Will walked out of the ballroom to steady his nerves. He noticed a spillover crowd down the hall. He made a “What’s up?” gesture to Judy Chen, the communications chief at Lancaster-Webb. She came over.

“It’s Glove Girl. You know, the blogger,” she said, as if this explained anything. “I think she may have stolen your crowd, boss.”

“Who is she?” Will asked.

Judy’s eyebrows shot up. “You mean you don’t read her stuff on the Web?” Will’s expression proved he didn’t. “Evan hasn’t talked to you about her?” Will gave her another blank look. “OK, um, she works for us. And you know how we’ve been seeing all this new demand for the old SteriTouch glove? She’s the one behind it. She’s been on a roll for a while, talking it up on her blog.”

Evan joined them in the hall just in time to catch the end of Judy’s comments. “Right,” he said. “Glove Girl. Guess I’d better go hear what she’s telling folks.” He glanced at his boss, a little sheepishly. “You won’t mind, I hope, if I’m not in the room for your presentation?”

“No problem,” Will said. He watched Evan and Judy hurry toward the room down the hall. With a sigh, he headed back into the Pelican room. As he delivered his remarks to the small group that had gathered, the words “blog” and “Glove Girl” and that wonderful but mystifying news about the surge in SteriTouch sales kept swimming around in his head. The speech he gave was shorter than usual. In fact, he was already on his way to the Mockingbird room when Glove Girl’s session ended in applause.

As the doors opened and people began streaming into the corridor, Will spotted her. She was wearing a gold lamé cocktail dress and a pair of pale green surgical gloves. They looked like evening gloves on her. Extraordinary. But the people filing past him appeared to have taken her quite seriously. “I liked how she handled the last question,” one was saying. Will overheard Judy talking to Evan: “She’s very good, isn’t she?” And Evan’s response: “No kidding.”
Will pulled both of his employees aside. "We need to have a meeting about this. ASAP."

Beware the Blog
That evening, the three were in Will’s suite, huddled around a speakerphone. Conferencing from Lancaster-Webb’s headquarters in Cupertino, California, were Jordan Longstreth, the company’s legal counsel, and Tom Heffernan, vice president of human resources. Judy was briefing them all on blogging, who Glove Girl was, and what she could possibly be up to.

"It’s short for Web logging," Judy explained to the group. "A blog is basically an online journal where the author—the blogger—keeps a running account of whatever she’s thinking about. Every day or so, the blogger posts a paragraph or two on some subject. She may even weave hyperlinks to related Web sites into the text."

"It’s amazing the stuff some of these people write," Evan added, "and how many people find their way to the sites. My brother-in-law, who lives in New York, is a blogger. And he gets e-mail from the weirdest places—Iceland, Liberia...everywhere.

"One day, a blogger might write something about her cat, the next day about the technology conference she just attended, or software bug fixes, or her coworkers," Evan went on. "You find that kind of thing especially in the blogs of dot-com casualties; they never learned to separate their work lives from their personal lives."

Evan meant that last remark to be pointed. Glove Girl’s site juxtaposed her commentary on blood-borne pathogens with tales about her love life. Frequent visitors to her blog knew all about her rags-to-riches journey from emergency room nurse to COO of a Web-based company that peddled health advice; her subsequent bankruptcy; her fruitless attempts to land a good corporate communications position; and her life as an assistant foreman at the Compton plant of Lancaster-Webb’s surgical gloves unit. Few would mistake Glove Girl’s blog for Lancaster-Webb’s own site, but they might not know the company hadn’t authorized it.

The site’s existence wasn’t so troubling by itself, Will thought. But when Judy explained that Glove Girl had been blogging about the pending launch of the nitrile gloves and about competitors’ products and customers’ practices, Will became alarmed. To top things off, Judy revealed—somewhat hesitantly—that last week Glove Girl had written on her site, “Will Somerset wears a hairpiece?” The room went silent.

"OK, she’s outta here. Get her a copy of Who Moved My Cheese?" he said to his team, knowing it would get a big laugh in the room and on the speakerphone. “All right, I’ll join the Hair Club for Men. Now tell me the really bad news: What did she write about the Houston Clinic deal? Are we going to lose it?"

Before Judy could answer, Jordan’s voice came over the line: “Can I add one thing? Getting fired would be just the beginning of her troubles if she’s sharing confidential product information.”

Judy explained that Glove Girl had reported on her site that Lancaster-Webb would be making a big sales pitch to the Houston Clinic. Glove Girl had learned that the clinic’s cesarean delivery rate was off the charts, and she was questioning the ethics of doing business with a facility like that. Fort Worth General, she’d noticed, did a third as many C-sections.

“Maybe that’s why Taylor didn’t show,” Will remarked, as the pieces began to come together.

“Sorry, boss. We had a chat with her a few weeks ago about discussing our customers on her blog, and she promised to be more careful. I guess it didn’t make much difference,” Judy said.

“You’ve documented that?” Tom asked. Judy assured him she had.

Evan then described how surprised he was to hear that the company’s older SteriT Touch gloves had suddenly started flying out of the warehouse. “We hadn’t been marketing them lately. The thing was, Glove Girl was raving about them on-line. Sales shot up right after she linked her blog to one of our Web pages. You remember that book Goon Market I gave you last year, Will? Her blog works just like that. These things get close to the customer in ways that an ad campaign just can’t."

“If I give you more bad news, boss?” Judy asked. “She’s got a pen pal in our factory in China who’s been writing about conditions there. Glove Girl doesn’t always paint a pretty picture.”

Evan jumped in again. “Wait a minute. Did you search the whole blog? There were also some e-mails from people saying we should be paying our plant workers in China what the workers get here. And Glove Girl defended us really well on that point.”

“Tell me,” Will said, “how the heck did she end up on the conference schedule?”

“Apparently, the chief organizer is a big Glove Girl fan and asked her to discuss blogging as the ultimate customer intimacy tool,” Judy said with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I tried to get him to change the time of her session.”

“I know it’s late,” Will told his team, “but before we make any decisions about Glove Girl, I’m heading to the business center to look at her blog. Evan, apparently you know your way around it. Why don’t you come with me?”

With the meeting adjourned, Will and Evan made their way through the hotel to the business center, discussing the issues Glove Girl had raised. As the two men approached the entrance to the center, a petite blond was leaving. She held the door for them, and then walked away as Evan pointed and whispered, “That’s her. She was probably in here posting a new entry. Let’s check.” He typed “glove girl” into Google. Her blog came up as the number one listing against 1,425 hits. He clicked to it.

Evan showed his boss the post. “See the time and date stamp? She just posted this”—the entry was Glove Girl’s
mild swipe at the food being served at the conference.

"I can't disagree with her," the CEO said. "So where do we start?"

Evan gave Will a quick cybertour, and then had to run to another conference call, leaving his boss to fend for himself. Will spent the next hour alternately enthralled and enraged by what he read on Glove Girl's blog.

**An Underground Resource?**

One foot in front of the other. That was the thing Will loved about jogging—you just keep putting one foot in front of the other, he thought, as he took another circuit around the hotel grounds. A lot easier than grappling with this that's because Houston's been doing pioneering work that's attracted hundreds of women from all over the country," he explained. "Do you think you can get Glove Girl to post that?"

"I'll certainly try. This blogging thing is new to me, you know."

"You guys are really ahead of the curve on this. I'd like to meet Glove Girl," Rex added.

So would I, Will thought. "I'll see what I can do," he said quickly. "I'm heading in. I'll talk to her about putting those cesarean statistics in the right context."

As Rex sauntered off, Will flipped open his cell phone and called Evan. "Get her," is all he had to say. "Business center, in an hour."

"Yep. The blogging interfaces reside on Internet servers for the most part, not on your computer. Some people do wireless blogging. Some do audio blogging with a cell phone. Hey, read this. Glove Girl got a manicure with Houston's head of nursing and found out why the cesarean rate is so high. She's posted a correction."

"My lucky day," Will said. "I think, Evan, do you have a clue how much she's said about yesterday's product release?"

"We can search the site. Watch." Evan typed in the words "nitrile gloves," and a few listings appeared.

They both began to read. It was clear she'd done a very detailed job of describing the surgical gloves' benefits and features—the same ones Will had outlined in his speech.

"She's definitely thorough," Evan had to admit.

"Yes, and she's got good questions," Will said as he kept reading.

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At noon, the sun was high in a cloudless sky. Will and Evan were at Kimonos, waiting to be seated.

The Houston Clinic's Sam Taylor spotted Will. "It's a good thing you took care of that," he said.

"I didn't have anything to do with it," Will said, correcting him. "She's a free agent. You need to thank your head of nursing for giving her the facts."

"I'll do that," Taylor said, and then rather abruptly excused himself.

Rex Croft was standing a few feet away. He came over, smiling broadly. "We want to sign a deal—you'll be the exclusive supplier of our surgical gloves," he said.

Will shook his hand happily. "Great."

"But we also want to hire Glove Girl," Rex whispered. "My people say we need her in a big way. I hate to admit it, but her blog is a lot more persuasive than your advertising. Can you spare her?"

"I'm not sure," Will said, genuinely perplexed.

**What should Lancaster-Webb do about Glove Girl?**

Four commentators offer expert advice.