

# The 'Explain yourself' Index: The corporations that are best at telling the world about themselves online

A prologue to the Bowen Craggs Index of Online Excellence 2018

November 2017

[www.bowencraggs.com](http://www.bowencraggs.com)



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# Overview

**The leaders in our ‘Explain yourself’ Index (see page 7 for full ranking) are all companies that decided that openness is the best response, and the place they express that openness is the internet, David Bowen says.**

*Dear big company,*

How do you tell the world about yourself? I don’t mean about your products, but about you. You are a corporation that needs to attract the best employees; that has a reputation that can easily be bruised; that has enemies out to do just that; that has shareholders ready to praise or punish you through their wallets; and that has customers who increasingly want to know that they are buying from an organization that cares about the world.

Where is your voice, dear company? Is it your press office, talking to the media? Investor relations or human resources teams, talking to fund managers or jobseekers? Is it your marketing department, with its promotion and advertising? All these – but these days, by far the most cost-effective and powerful way to get your voice heard is through the internet: your websites and social media channels are not only the principal windows through which the world will see you, they are your voice.

But do you realize that? You pay lip service to it certainly. Look at any corporate advertisement

*‘Your websites and social media channels are not only the principal windows through which the world will see you, they are your voice.’*

– you will see the web address right there at the bottom. But do you (by which I mean of course your senior managers) really understand the importance of company-level online communications? Judging from our work, few do. We have been monitoring the online communications efforts of the world’s largest companies for more than 20 years, and are regularly surprised by the lack of interest senior managers show in their primary communication channel. The corporate website is the biggest publication any company produces: biggest in size – thousands of pages – and massively biggest in readership. We closely monitor traffic on about 20 sites; eight have more than 6m visits a year, four have more than 20m. This is not so strange: where do you go if you want to find out about a company? To Google probably; and then, quite likely, to the company website. So do millions of

others. Yet the annual report often gets much more attention than the site – the flea is pampered, while the elephant is ignored. It is strange.

## Measuring the company voice

Bowen Craggs has been producing a ranking of the best corporate online communicators since 2007. Our next full Index of Online Excellence is out in January. In the run-up to that, we have produced this ‘Explain yourself’ Index – but it could be called the ‘company voice’ index, because that is what it measures.

‘Explain yourself’ is a phrase with two meanings. First, it is what a parent asks of a misbehaving child – ‘Why have you been bad and what are you going to do about it?’ It’s a question that Uber should be answering now; not long ago it was Volkswagen and Wells Fargo. Before that, any number of companies. When will it be you?

Second, ‘Explain yourself’ is what people ask if they want to know what you do, how you work. You may be very good at explaining and promoting your products or services. But can you explain yourself, as a corporation? What you do, how you work, your history, who your bosses are and – crucially – the good stuff you do for society (we have a ‘social initiatives’ metric).

## Overview *continued*

The Bowen Craggs ‘Explain yourself’ Index pulls these two together. Our standard Index methodology looks at company information in one metric, and ‘building a reputation for responsibility’ in another. We have taken the top scorers in these – drawn from the largest 200 companies in the world – and have rescored them in a more granular fashion. Some of the metrics we use cover both areas (eg use of social media and storytelling), others are specific to reputation management or company information (see methodology box, page 6).

### **Nestlé leads the top 15 by boldly confronting hostility**

The most striking thing about the top 15 companies is that the great majority are in industries prone to controversy, or attract more than their share of argument. Oil, pharmaceuticals and tobacco account for seven of them, while Nestlé is a celebrated hostility magnet. They are all companies that decided that openness is the best response, and the place they express that openness is the internet.

Nestlé is the boldest. Its ‘Ask Nestlé’ replays criticisms and gives its answers to them. Some are specific – using water in drought-stricken California, a mass recall of Maggi noodles in India. Others come up again and again. Nestlé has been boycotted for decades over its baby milk:

read a question and answer session on it [here](#). The former chairman once reportedly said water ‘is not a human right’ – that one pops up over and again on social media, so see what Nestlé has to say about it. With all, the arguments are subtle and need space to be explained – the web, unlike soundbites or advertisements, can provide that.

Ask Nestlé also encourages people to get in touch on its social media channels, which they do, often aggressively. The company responds carefully, linking to independent sites that underpin its views (see page 8).

### **BP arises from deep water**

If Nestlé is under continuous assault on multiple fronts, BP had one appalling reputational disaster, the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010. Its CEO’s inept response in the aftermath made things worse, but it learned very quickly how to use the internet – not to defend itself, but to pour out information that could, cumulatively, make

*‘Just because it is a corporate website, it need not be dull. Indeed it must not be.’*

a difference. If you were a Vietnamese speaking fisherman in Louisiana, there was a claim form on BP.com for you.

The site was for many months a massive disaster response mechanism – and at one point was one of the most visited sites on the entire web – and it has only recently pulled back from that role. It was caught out at first by its lack of social media understanding, but has learned fast, and is now a leader, similar to Nestlé (see page 8).

When it comes to telling the world about the good things you do, rather than putting up a defence, we put a lot of emphasis on how engagingly this is done – as we do about the ‘company information’ part of the scoring. Just because it is a corporate website, it need not be dull. Indeed it must not be.

### **Unilever proves its sustainability claims**

Unilever scores well on our ‘social initiative’ metric. Its group brand is all about sustainability, and its websites and social channels are steeped in ‘responsibility’ messages. These can only work if they seem to have substance, and Unilever’s do. A piece headed ‘[We want more toilets used by more people](#)’ links to a 200 page book with ideas on how to get more Indians to accept the need for toilets. There is an extraordinary amount of detail here, all produced by Unilever.

## Overview *continued*

### Stories that are beyond fashionable

There are many ways of telling the world you are a responsible citizen. You can for example announce how much tax you pay, [as Shell does](#). Or you can tell individual stories that reflect well on you. ‘Stories’ have become a fashion online, too often in the belief that calling something a story makes it one, which it does not. The best stories are narratives (as novels are), and are punchily written.

Case studies based on individual lives often work well. Axa’s [Spotlight section](#) is a ‘magazine’ full of first person stories, while GSK carries [vlogs](#) – video blogs – made by employees working with charities around the world.

### The website as magazine

Axa’s Spotlight is a good example of the online magazine. [BP](#) and [Bayer](#) both have well constructed magazines, called just that. GSK shows a little more imagination with ‘[Behind the science](#)’, as does BASF with ‘[We create chemistry](#)’.

Eni has [Eniday](#), a lively publication covering the energy world, while Coca-Cola has gone furthest, turning its entire site into a magazine, called [Journey](#). General Electric meanwhile has a particularly attractive magazine on a linked but separate site: [GE Reports](#).

*‘Do not ignore the power of the written word. A well written story may or may not work; a poorly written one never will.’*

These all have strengths and weaknesses, but have been created on the common understanding that a website is indeed a publication.

### ‘Corporate video’ does not have to mean ‘dull’

With broadband now so widespread, videos of all sorts have become a staple of corporate websites. Many are dull, but the best are compelling. We particularly like those that are not too obviously self-serving. Maersk has [a sophisticated and slightly spooky film](#) about a Cuban couple with a company called Witchcraft Soaps that does not mention Maersk until the last few seconds, when we learn it has opened the first direct shipping route between Cuba and Europe. But if you want really sinister, watch BAT’s ‘[This is the man](#)’ film about illegal cigarettes – the only corporate video

we know with a murder in it. This is very much BAT speaking out as a company: tobacco piracy is one area where big tobacco believes it is on the side of the angels.

### Simple interactivity works

The web can do things no other medium can through its interactivity. Nestlé’s ‘[Your life in food](#)’ tells you what was happening in the year you were born at a click. Maersk’s [home page](#) has a world map with dots all over it. Click to find out what it does there, and click again to see a (usually first person) story associated with it. Tip: Keep it simple; complex things have a habit of going wrong.

### Consider your words carefully... and your images

Do not ignore the power of the written word though. A well written story may or may not work; a poorly written one never will. Good English (nearly always the main language of a corporate site) adds richness to the company’s voice. Altria begins its ‘[Investing in communities section](#)’ with ‘Almost 60 years ago, Gorge Weissman, a vice president at Philip Morris, excitedly sat in his company’s boardroom ...’, while [BP’s history section](#) starts thus: ‘The smell was unmistakable. It was a smell you could see. The vapours rose clearly in the sunlight. But to explorer George Reynolds it was the best thing he

## Overview *continued*

has smelled in seven years. He instructed the men to keep drilling ...’ You can’t not read on, can you?

If a site looks good, that helps (though looks must never overpower usability). [Axa](#) combines carefully chosen images with a bright, open feel. [Maersk](#) does the same but makes many of them move with ‘looping’ videos. [L’Oréal](#) is suitably sumptuous. [Eni](#) has some stunning photos, while [Roche](#) makes sophisticated use of fonts. Away from our top 15, look at [Shell.com](#), which subtly implants the brand’s red and yellow in many of its photos.

### **Saying who you are and what you do sounds simple, but few get it right**

The more mundane, but crucial, side of ‘explain yourself’ looks at the elements that help build up a picture of the company. Some forget to say who they are – or think everyone knows. [Luxottica](#) makes neither mistake, with a succinct sentence introducing itself on its home page. Avoid the

*‘Perhaps the biggest opportunity for a company to be really engaging comes with history.’*

urge so many marketers have to hide behind abstract slogans. Nestlé’s description of itself as the ‘world’s largest food and beverage company’ is so much more useful than the one it replaced: ‘the leading health, nutrition and wellness company.’ It comes back to good clear English (tip: hire a good journalist or copywriter).

We have looked at how well companies say how they are organized and what their values are. This is so often the blandest part of any site, so hurrah for the few companies that try to harden up the abstractions with links to show how it is ‘living its values’.

Total uses a [short film](#) about how a man in Kenya rose through its ranks to illustrate its ‘stand together’ team spirit. GSK meanwhile manages to make its purpose seem inspiring with a [potent corporate video](#) – quite an achievement.

Who runs the company? Every company has boss biographies, but few make them seem remotely interesting. See page 9 for those that do.

Perhaps the biggest opportunity to be really engaging comes with history (see page 10). A typical multinational is as big as a medium sized country in income terms – it, like the country, must have quite a story to tell. And that is a big part of explaining yourself.

## METHODOLOGY

We started with the scores taken for the two relevant metrics (‘Company information’ and ‘Building a reputation for responsibility’) from the main [Index of Online Excellence](#), and made a long list of the front runners. We then rescored using a more granular approach, as follows.

Across both metrics [maximum scores in brackets]:

- Magazine approach – how well it tells stories [10]
- Visual design [5]
- Effective use of social media [10]
- Web innovation – eg. use of interactivity and multimedia [5]

For the ‘company information’ metric, we scored:

- Explanations of what the company does and how it is organized [5]
- Explanations of its approach/philosophy [5]
- Information on its leadership [5]
- History [5]

For the ‘building a reputation for responsibility’ metric, we scored:

- Reputation management – handling controversy [15]
- Explaining social initiatives [15]

Total maximum score: 80

Where a company has no particular controversies, we give a score for reputation management based on the average scores in other areas.

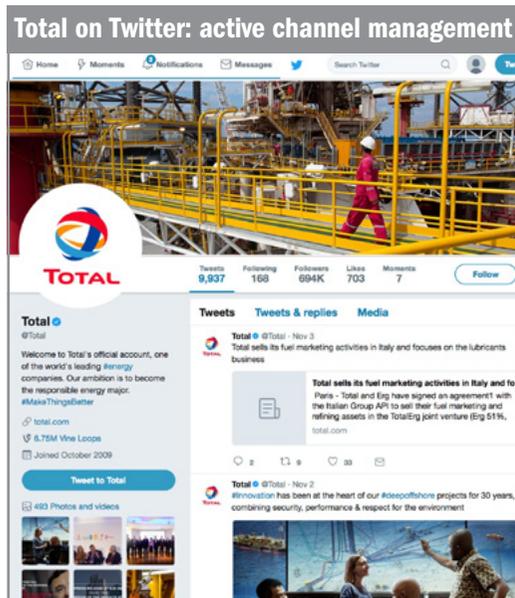
We do not include CSR reporting skill (though this will be covered in the full Index).

# The top 15

Position	Company	[10] Magazine approach	[5] Design	[10] Social media	[5] Multimedia and interactivity	[5] Who we are	[5] Approach to values and philosophy	[5] Leadership	[5] History	[15] Reputation management	[15] Social initiative	[80] Total score
1	Nestlé	8	3	9	3	4	4	3	4	14	13	65
= 2	Eni	8	4	8	3	4	4	4	4	12	13	64
= 2	GSK	8	4	8	4	4	3	4	3	13	13	64
= 2	Unilever	8	4	8	3	3	3	4	3	14	14	64
= 5	AXA	9	5	7	3	4	3	3	3	13	13	63
= 5	Bayer	9	4	7	4	4	3	4	4	12	12	63
= 7	BAT	8	4	7	4	3	3	3	3	14	13	62
= 7	BP	9	4	8	4	2	3	3	4	13	12	62
= 7	Total	8	4	8	4	4	4	3	3	12	12	62
= 10	L'Oréal	7	4	8	4	4	3	3	4	12	12	61
= 10	Roche	7	5	7	4	2	4	4	3	12	13	61
12	Luxottica	7	4	8	4	4	4	3	4	9	13	60
= 13	Altria	7	3	7	2	4	3	3	4	13	13	59
= 13	BASF	8	3	8	3	4	3	4	4	10	12	59
= 13	Maersk	7	5	8	3	3	4	3	3	11	12	59

# Best practice: social media top three

Social media has been used for customer service and brand promotion for many years, but companies have struggled to use it as part of their corporate voice. One problem is that it is not one thing but many – Twitter has little in common with YouTube – and the relationship with websites has rarely been understood. The companies that do understand social media consider each channel as a separate platform, with different editorial requirements and audiences; and run them as a complement to the web. Usually web and group-level social media are managed by the same team.



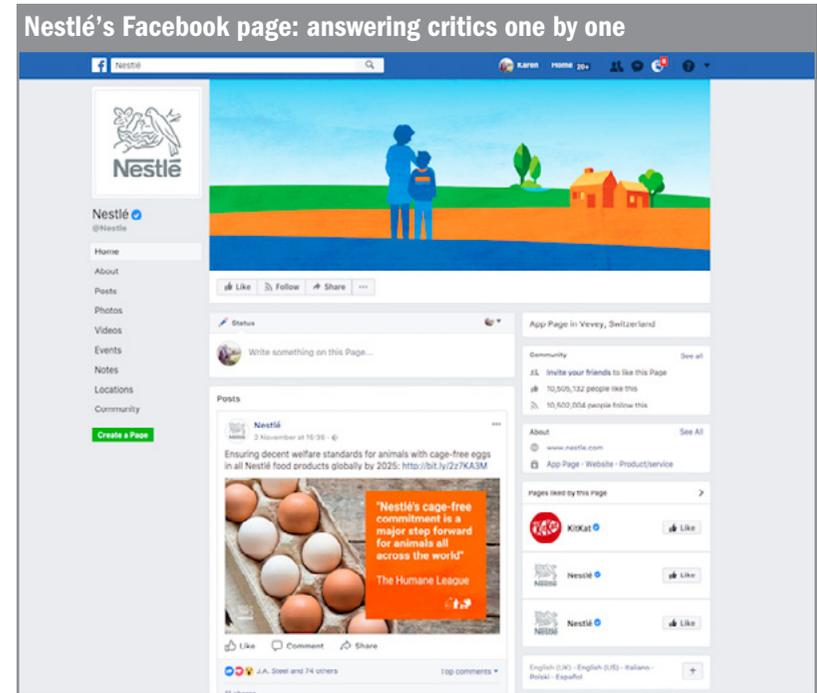
- **Nestlé**

Nestlé was one of the first companies to put up a [corporate Facebook page](#), and quickly found out how risky that was when in 2010 it was swamped by Greenpeace supporters, and pretty much forced to withdraw from its own 'territory'.

It still gets regular criticism (see Overview, page 4), but is unusual in taking the trouble to respond to even minor criticisms – as well as to questions and praise. Once you have a trained team and a database of replies that can be tailored, answering your critics one by one becomes possible, if not simple.

- **Shell**

Shell's [social media directory](#), reached from a menu at the foot of each page, lists an impressive number of channels, divided by business. It is one of the many companies now using Instagram – image quality is as high as it is on the site (see Overview, page 6). But it is most unusual in having and promoting its Chinese-language Weibo channels, including one for careers. And it gives special emphasis to the long-running blog by its climate change adviser. This is serious (and seriously interesting stuff), now supported by a Twitter feed.



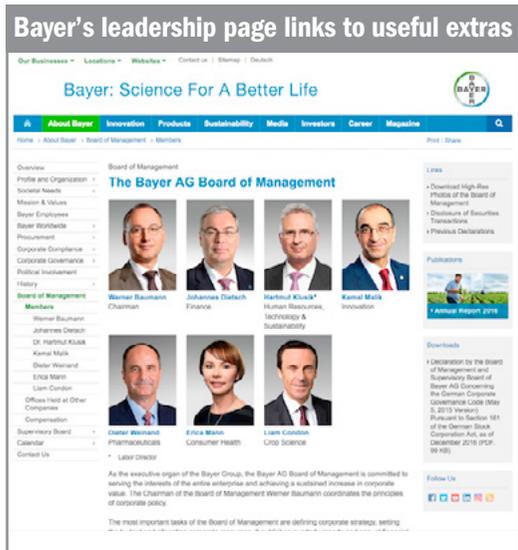
- **Total**

Total declares its commitment to social media with a Twitter feed embedded on the home page. This is not in itself particularly useful, but the channels themselves are notably actively managed. Its Facebook page has a slick video in its 'About' section, and the Messenger box that pops up says that it will reply to messages 'typically within a day'. Its [Twitter feed](#) is constantly updated and has a massive following.

# Best practice: leadership information top three

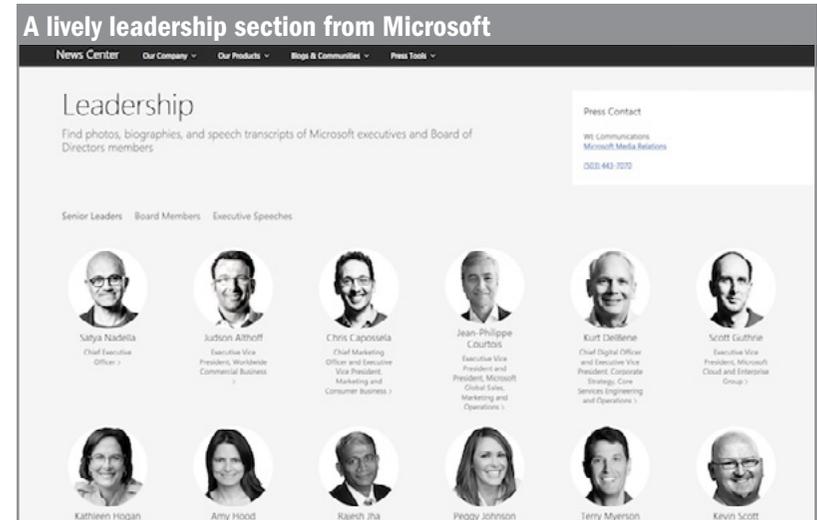
Almost every company's website provides biographies of its top management team and board members. Most give bare bones professional information, but some go a step further, helping to give a feel for what they are really like. This makes sense: if you want to explain the company, you need to explain the people who run it.

- Bayer**  
 Bayer's [Board of Management section](#) is relatively rare in linking to 'extras' alongside biographies. The chairman's biography links to a video of a recent discussion of results, while

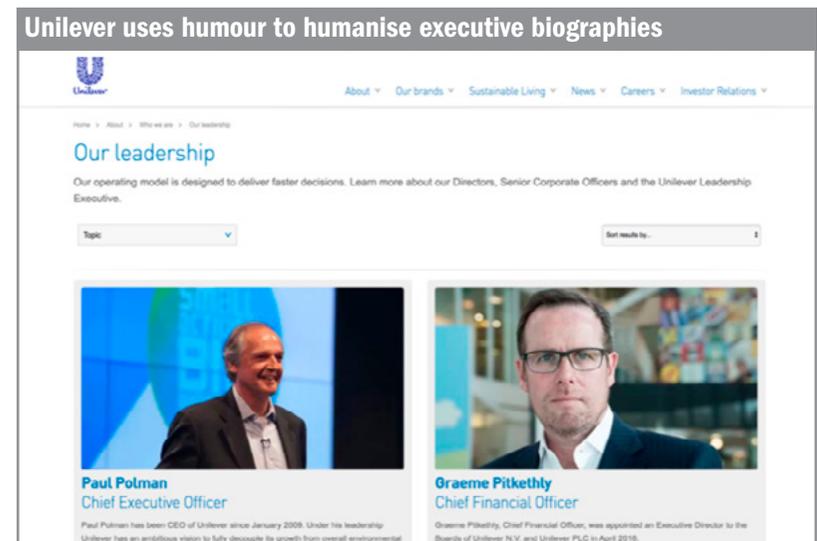


Kemal Malik, head of innovation, has a link to a short video in the company's Research magazine. It makes him come across as bright and cheerful – reflecting well on the company, as well as him.

- Microsoft**  
 Microsoft's [leadership section](#) is notably lively. The landing page has an unusual gallery with round monochrome portraits of a smiling bunch of folk (the smiles are more natural than those we find on most sites). The biographies are written as continuous narrative, so avoid the somewhat abrupt feel we often find. Accompanying photos are suitably informal (though it would help to provide more – picture editors like to have a choice).



- Unilever**  
 Our [leadership](#) on Unilever's site has straightforward biographies, but a couple of touches make it stand out. Each manager has links to his or her LinkedIn page and Twitter feed, if they have them, while the CFO Graeme Pitkethly has been allowed to import a little gentle humour. 'With a passion for blues music, he is an enthusiastic, but poor, guitarist'. This is a little risky, given that humour does not always travel well across borders, but most people will see it for what it is – an attempt to humanise himself. That cannot be bad.



# Best practice: company history top three

**The biggest companies in the world almost by definition have fascinating histories – but how well they are told varies enormously. A few companies have almost nothing on their websites – perhaps arguing that the past does not matter – but if they want people to understand them, people need to know where they came from.**

- **BNP Paribas**

Long scrolling pages are fashionable but usually unhelpful on a corporate website, because they make it less usable. One place they can work well is with the history because users can literally scroll through time. [The BNP Paribas page](#) starts with the foundation of the Société Générale de Belgique in 1822, runs through the foundation of the other banks that make up the group and so arrives at the present.

Lively design and text and an informative video all help, but the real depth comes from a site that is regularly linked down the page: [The Well of History](#) is an encyclopaedia packed with articles – extraordinarily detailed, and also well presented.

- **Volkswagen AG**

German companies are often fascinating because of the way they treat the dark periods in their history. Volkswagen has a feature on its [Place of Remembrance](#), an exhibit on forced labour, and does not skip the horrors in its narrative.

An interactive timeline is good, though a little hard to use, but the real strength is in the mass of detail in a series of downloadable documents – books really – telling the group's story.

- **BP**

[BP's history](#) stands out for the way it is written. We quote the first sentence in our main piece (see Overview, page 4), but the quality of English is maintained throughout the narrative.

Presentation is simple but compelling, with good use of old photos and embedded 'slide shows' illustrating each era. The bad times – particularly Deepwater Horizon – get suitable coverage: there is no point hiding them.



# About Bowen Craggs

## WE REVIEW.

## WE MEASURE.

## WE ADVISE.

To make your website and social media channels better for your business and your customers.

## WHAT WE DO

We are experts in global online corporate communications. We help you improve the effectiveness of your websites, mobile and social channels.

You can rely on the independence of our advice because we do not build websites. What we do is help you to improve your effectiveness with clear strategy, expert benchmarking, market research, analytics, best practice and content strategy.

Our research – gathered over 14 years and used by more than 50 of the Fortune Global 500 – can help you find and maintain the right course.

## INDEX OF ONLINE EXCELLENCE

Every year we publish the Bowen Craggs Index of Online Excellence, which is established as the most credible ranking of large corporate online estates, and provides a deep database of best practice.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

Bowen Craggs is unique: we specialise in group-level digital communications. Here are three ways you can benefit from our knowledge and expertise:

### **Access research that will improve your online strategy**

The world's deepest analysis of corporate online estates. Constant audience research across all stakeholder groups. A trusted and growing global knowledge-sharing network.

These are the cornerstones of our research reports and bespoke consultancy.

## **Explore the world's most powerful resource for global web managers**

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