

The demystification of CEO celebrities

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Media Mount A student 'presents an intriguing account of the media's role in creating infamous CEO celebrities'

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Sir Richard Branson has done just about everything to promote his company-jump off a skyscraper, travel the world in a hot air balloon, and race across the Atlantic in a sailboat.



Emile Wamsteker/Bloomberg News

The phenomenon of larger-than-life business executives goes well beyond rock star entrepreneurs like Sir Richard Branson, president of Virgin Atlantic Airways, Ltd., says Mount Allison University student Moritz Günther. Journalists tend to focus on a single individual to explain a company rather than delve into more complex issues that affect a firm's performance, says Günther.

In the process, the knighted billionaire who heads up the Virgin brand has probably become better-known than most of the products he markets. But the phenomenon of larger-than-life business executives goes well beyond rock star entrepreneurs like Branson.

This summer Mount Allison University commerce student Moritz Günther, 22, explored how business executives are portrayed in the printed media, and how they sometimes take the brunt of the responsibility for a company's failure - and success. Günther said journalists tend to focus on a single individual to explain a company rather than delve into more complex issues that affect a firm's performance. This leads them to exaggerate the dependence of an organization on its top executive, popularizing them in positive or negative ways, Günther said in interview Friday. Günther said portrayals of superstar businessman Jack Welch, former chairman and CEO of General Electric, typify this kind of media coverage. "We hear a lot about the 'Welch effect,'" Günther said, "but I think it has been a very good time for G.E. because of various factors and not just the genius of a single man."

Günther also examined the themes and phrases journalists use to construct present-day infamous top executives, such as Jeffrey Skilling, the disgraced head of Enron, and media baron Conrad Black.

In researching the topic, Günther, himself a contributor and last year a managing editor at the student newspaper, looked at articles in a number of U.S. and Canadian publications since 2006. Günther found journalists explain a company's failures through the CEO, using terms like 'victim' to 'lack of charisma' to 'wicked personality.'

Gina Grandy, a professor in the commerce department, supervised the study. "Moritz's research will make a significant contribution to the existing literature around CEO celebrities and will also be of interest to a broader audience," said Grandy. "It presents an intriguing account of the media's role in creating infamous CEO celebrities and the CEO's responsibility for poor financial performance."

Günther, who moved from Germany three years ago, graduates this October with an honours degree in commerce. While Günther's not certain of his future plans, he said his research has taught him people need to be more critical in everyday life. "I should be thinking about what I see in the media, instead of just accepting something," he said.