STRATEGIES AND TOOLS FOR CORPORATE BLOGGING

JOHN CASS
Strategies and Tools for Corporate Blogging
To my father, Gene Cass, for all of your help and support.
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While this book describes some of the benefits of corporate blogging, the book’s focus is to give the reader the tools and strategies to develop expertise in how to build a successful corporate blog. This book is not about why blogging is necessary for a company per se; rather, the focus is on enabling the reader to conduct effective corporate blogger relations.

In 2003, when I started blogging I was interested in how businesses can use blogs to reach high rankings in search engines, but quickly discovered blogs do so much more in terms of creating dialogue between companies and their customers. When I was approached by Butterworth-Heinemann Elsevier in late 2005 and asked if I’d like to write a book about the topic of corporate blogging, I was excited to be able to bring together in a book all of the research and ideas I’ve collected over the last few years. Although many books have been published on this topic, none have really targeted how to conduct blogger relations. This book sets out to help the reader to build a successful blog using blogger relations.

Now here is an overview of each of the chapters:

The first chapter describes the need for blogger relations by describing the evolution of the Internet and the web, and how the development of blogs requires a new approach in marketing if a company is going to be successful in using blogs as a way to reach an audience.

The second chapter provides a template for how to develop both an assessment of a company’s resources and the blogging community. The plan and tools will give the reader the framework to decide when and if a company is able to start blogging.

The third chapter provides a plan for developing an effective corporate blogging strategy that will enable a company to blog. Ideas and strategies that are relevant and appropriate for blogging are discussed and described from public relations, search engine optimization, journalism, and online marketing.
The fourth chapter provides direction on how to write guidelines for employees and readers for a blog. This chapter provides examples of the potential harmful consequences of employees publishing online, and suggestions on how to avoid such circumstances.

The fifth chapter examines blogging systems, popular blog monitoring tools, bookmarking tools, CGM measurement companies, and how each system and technology tool can help a company build a blogging practice and strategy. The chapter also describes how to integrate effective blogging strategy into a blog’s creative and navigation design.

The sixth chapter describes what writing and research skills are needed for a corporate blog. The chapter reviews some of the different article types from journalism that can be used for blog writing.

The seventh chapter describes the art of blogging conversation, which, unlike advertising and public relations, allow your audience to have instant conversations with blog authors. This chapter also describes how to use dialogue to connect with an audience.

The eighth chapter describes how a company can build trust for their brand using a blog and provides several ideas and case studies that demonstrate how a company might build a blogging program to increase that trust.

The ninth chapter demonstrates the importance of developing an assessment to ensure that a company is able to build a successful blogging strategy by using the example of the automobile blogging community. The chapter uses the blogging community assessment template provided in chapter two to examine the automobile blogging community. The chapter analyzes a list of blogs in the automobile community to provide some suggestions as to how a company might develop a blogging strategy that would work for that community.

The tenth chapter provides a mixture of tips on how to build a blog through a series of quotes from blog reader interviews of several corporate blogs. Reading the real thoughts of blog readers about why they read corporate blogs demonstrates how establishing credibility is very important to the success of a blog.

The final chapter, chapter eleven, describes how podcasters and Web 2.0 websites can be used to build or connect with a community. It also shows how some of the same techniques used in blogging can also be used with new social media to connect with audiences through the web.

I hope you will enjoy reading the book and find the information useful in your own company’s blogging efforts. Corporate blogging is still in its infancy, and I continue to watch the development of the technology and the communities as they evolve. If you want to continue the conversation, contact me at jcass@nwlink.com or post a comment on my blog at http://pr.typepad.com.

John Cass
Arlington, MA
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Lastly I want to thank Jane Macdonald, my Acquisitions Editor at Butterworth-Heinemann, an imprint of Elsevier, Inc., for having asked me to write the book, and for having supported me throughout the process.
The evolution of the Internet has been a step-by-step process of technological development, and each technological advance has made it easier to communicate with others. As time has progressed and Internet technologies have become more sophisticated, the use of those technologies for communications has required greater skill and knowledge to communicate effectively with other people via the Internet. After all, making a technology easier to use does not necessarily mean that people understand what the technology does or how they can use it. Each step in mastering each new tool means that people gain technical familiarity and experience that they can apply to the next Internet technological development. This chapter will discuss the evolution of the Internet and the web through the development of email, bulletin board, forums, and blogs. When blogs developed, there were some important differences between previous technological developments and blogs, and those differences resulted in blogs being very successful publishing and communications tools. The differences between forums and blogs illustrate the reasons for the blog’s successes in the area of helping blogs to get top rankings in search engines. Blogs are not just tools for getting a top ranking; they also allow companies to connect personally with customers through individual employees.
People have shifted from reading newspapers to using the Internet to obtain their current news. People still watch TV, but sites such as YouTube are indications that online video is shifting viewers from TV to watching videos online. Advertisers are recognizing the shift in eyeballs and are moving resources to create content for the web, not for purposes of traditional advertising but to promote virally campaigns on the web. Newspapers are responding to the shift by beefing up their online editions, launching blogs and podcasts, and more. Online media sites are even starting to involve the audience in the development of content. Tom Abate, a news reporter from Sfgate.com, the San Francisco Chronicle’s online site, explained that journalists are “scrambling, experimenting and worrying,” and journalists, finding new methods of gathering and writing news, are faced with the changing patterns of media consumption and news development.1

The ability to publish and connect with others means that individuals have as much influence on the course of events today as companies once did in the world of mass media with advertising and public relations. Companies have to realize that it is important to listen to the community discussion about their industry online because that discussion can be easily found on the web. The shift in media consumption and the power of customers because of blogs and other social media sites is another reason why companies should start blogging.

Blogs can play a very significant role in how a company connects with their online audience because they are published and controlled by individuals. Even new technologies such as podcasting and video logging are launched through blogs. By necessity, a company relationship with their audience online has to take blogs into account. If companies want to connect with their audience, they have to enter a dialogue with the blogging community. The advantages of blogging are such that companies have to determine how to best use blogging to connect with their audience online. This book is about how a company can use the discipline of blogger relations to blog effectively.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERNET TOOLS

The Internet was built to exchange data and files, and some of those files contained messages; the messages in the files inspired the development of email. Email has been around since the 1970s, when it was initially used by the U.S. government for military uses and by the academic community for collaboration. The first commercial use of the Internet did not occur until the late 1980s, and it was not until the mid-1990s when the World Wide Web grew dramatically that large-scale adoption of email occurred. Consumers used the web to chat with their friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. Email became a means for selling a refrigerator, finding a partner, or hiring a van to move across the country. Because an email can be forwarded and sent via
the Internet with little effort, many consumers and companies adopted this new form of communicating. Users quickly realized that private email has the potential for public disclosure, and understanding the dangers, users take steps to avoid private information from being revealed too widely. Email is a less formal method of communication than letter writing that can be used for quick messages or for a longer essay.

Online bulletin boards developed during the 1980s. Bulletin boards were a precursor to the web that allowed people to connect to a single computer and exchange messages and information. Bulletin boards remained popular until the 1990s when web-based forums supplanted them. Forums provide a gathering place for people with shared interests to share and discuss ideas. A forum member might start a conversational thread, but all members of the forum are free to contribute to the discussion. Moderated forums ensure Internet users do not post messages that spam the forum with sales messages, off-topic comments, defamatory language, or obscene remarks. Although the discussion in many forums is often passionate and lively, the members of the forum are able to police themselves. Forums are more successful when more members actively participate in the discussion. Any new members entering a forum will assess a forum’s level of activity. If there are a lot of active threads in the forum, potential new members will be more confident that the forum is a good place to connect with other people of similar interests. Forums are places to share ideas about products and vendors. Companies used forums to join in on community discussions, and some forums could have significant impact on a company’s business. A math professor found that Intel’s chips were causing mathematical errors in calculation applications. The professor tried to contact Intel customer service, but he did not get a response, and after a few tries, he posted the problem on bulletin boards and forums. Intel’s share price dropped dramatically as a result of the revelation.

Tim Berners-Lee developed the World Wide Web in 1992 at CERN, a consortium of twenty European countries for the study of particle physics. The web was developed to facilitate collaboration between scientists at the various institutions. Before the web, the Internet had been confined to technology and academic communities. The development of the web transformed the speed of commercial development of the Internet because the straightforward and intuitive design of web browsers greatly simplified the process of locating information, and many more people began using the web to find information and connect with other web users all over the world. As more people became connected to the web, the new users increased the size of online communities already in existence on message groups and forums. As the number of people on the web increased, the opportunity for interaction and discussion about any topic grew exponentially. Subjects that were once thought obscure in a local community blossomed on the web.
Web search engines have been around since the early 1990s. People use search engines to find the topics, people, and communities they seek. Increasingly, consumers use the web to research products and services they wish to consider for purchase. Research indicates that search engines are often the first place Internet users visit to conduct research on the web. Google has become one of the most important search engines for Internet users. Google’s method of measuring the ranking of a website in its search engine results is based upon the content of the website and the links to that website. If other websites that are also highly ranked within a Google link to a website, then that website will receive a higher ranking in the Google search results. How search engines use links to rank websites was an important development in how people searched the web. Highly relevant webpages were easier to find as a result of Google’s innovative assessment of links. When you consider the volume of activity in forums, there are fewer links to a particular comment thread from other websites. This is because there is less need to link to other websites within a forum, as the discussion is within the forum community rather than between websites.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLOGS

During the mid-1990s, people began writing online diaries or journals. Most of those online journals were developed in manual hypertext markup language (HTML), the scripting language used by web designers to build pages. These types of websites became known as a weblog, which was eventually shortened to blog. Over time, developers built content management tools for managing and publishing content dynamically without having to master HTML. Entrepreneurs refined the content management tools and added more functionality for communicating effectively between people.

Blogs are websites that appear in journal format. Blog authors can write a series of entries, each post appears in sequential order, posts ranging from one to numerous can appear on the home page, and all entries can be archived and accessed through navigation on the home page. Blog authors use a content management system to write a post and publish quickly.

Similar to forums and bulletin boards, blogs allow others to easily interact and converse in a public setting. They allow Internet users to communicate more easily than most websites through tools such as comments, trackbacks, RSS, and social network bookmarking. Interaction is the key to building a successful blog. Technologies such as RSS, trackbacks, and commenting enable more personal interaction between people. Once these new technologies were available within blogs, conversation was facilitated between bloggers and readers.

The most common method of communication between bloggers and their readers is through comments. Blog readers can comment on a blog post by
entering a comment within a blog post comment. Blog authors can choose to answer a comment with their own comment in the same post or by writing another post.

Trackbacks are another tool for communication between blogs. Trackbacks allow you to notify other bloggers automatically that you have written a blog article referencing their article. The trackback works by a blog author writing an entry referencing another blog post. The blogger copies a trackback URL from the other author's blog post and uses the URL to notify the original blogger that an entry was written citing the blog post. A ping is sent automatically by the publishing system of the blog that cites the original post. Once the other blog is pinged, a reference and link appears on the other blog, unless moderated by the blogger.

Providing an RSS feed on a blog is a good way to update blog readers of content on a blog. A web feed or RSS feed enables the syndication of one website's content to another website or RSS feed reader. Blog readers can subscribe to a blog's RSS feed. An Internet user can discover if there are any updates to a blog by reviewing their RSS feed reader. Examples of RSS feed readers include Bloglines, NewsGator, and Feedster. Another way to find blog content is through RSS feed search engines. People can search RSS feeds in search engines such as Technorati.com or IceRocket.com by a keyword or a tag. Tags are keywords selected by the author and included as a way to identify a blog post. In addition to RSS, some blogs also provide blog readers with the ability to subscribe by email to the latest published postings by an author.

Social networking sites such as del.icio.us allow blog readers to bookmark a blog article. Social networking is a website that enables its members to contribute content, such as images or text lists, and then search through all of the content submitted by members; thereby, members can find other people with similar interests. del.icio.us provides users with the tools to bookmark and tag any webpage by keyword tags. Registered members can quickly search bookmarked articles using their tags. People searching the del.icio.us website find articles bookmarked and tagged by other users. Social networking websites such as Digg.com give members the ability to promote stories that rise in popularity on the homepage of Digg.com when a user promotes or discusses an article suggested by another Digg member.

The ability to easily set up a blog and interact between blog sites using trackbacks means that blogs have rapidly grown in number and prominence. Blogs can be set up through hosted solutions providers such as Google and Six Apart. Blogger from Google and TypePad from Six Apart are two of the most popular blogging platforms on the market. WordPress is another popular blogging system that has a free server version and a hosted solution.

Communities of blogs typically start with one or two bloggers. Using search engines, bloggers find one another through the keywords used to research
blog posts. Over time, the number of bloggers in a community increases as the community matures. It is not surprising that the blogging community in the technology sector has been well established for a number of years, as developers and technologists were the ones who developed blogs to be able to communicate with the world. Blogs were initially personal websites, although many blogs focused on a particular topic. Technological and political topics dominated the writings of many early bloggers.

A corporate blog is a blog published by a company or one of its employees, typically focusing on the company and its industry. In contrast to the growth of personal blogs, the growth of corporate blogging has been slow. One sector where blogs have expanded rapidly is the technology sector. During the early part of 2006, Chris Anderson of Wired Magazine and Ross Mayfield of SocialText instigated the Fortune 500 Wiki Project. The goal was an effort to catalog all Fortune 500 companies with blogs. The majority of the companies in the Fortune 500 engaged in blogging are in the technology or telecommunication industry.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FORUMS AND BLOGS

Blogs have not developed in isolation. Many prominent bloggers were already leaders in their industry who ran their own websites or were members of industry forums, journalists, or writers of articles in industry traditional media publications. As the number of blogs published by people on a specific topic increased, bloggers have effectively created communities discussing a variety of topics, industries, and personal tastes.

Blogs extend community discussion beyond the confines of forums and bulletin boards. When comparing a customer forum to a corporate blog, a forum is more of a closed community where most discussion occurs inside the forum between members. Occasionally, members refer to outside content and websites, but typically, the discussion is internal to the forum. A forum may be a public website accessible through search engines or, alternatively, a secure forum, available only to registered members. Unlike a blog, typically, forum members do not communicate with other members on other websites; the conversation remains within the forum.

Forums are best moderated, not managed. Rather than the forum operator initiating all of the discussion topics, forum members should be free to discuss any topic they wish. However, if they bring up subjects that are off topic, the forum post can be removed or the forum member reminded to post only relevant topics. A company with a forum can direct an occasional thread; however, members run the best forums. Editorial control of a forum is best left to the membership. There should be some restrictions on what can be posted to reduce off-topic posts and sales pitches. But it is best to give the membership of a forum
the ability to pose and answer questions freely. A company can then learn from their customers by observing customer questions and ideas posted in a forum thread.

Forum posts can get easily lost in the large volume of content, which means that they are not always the best way to get information out to customers quickly. In contrast, the sequential design of most blog home pages, the ownership, and the editorial control of blog content makes it easy for writers to focus readers’ attention on the last story published. In a forum, on the other hand, the community decides the current discussion topic of the forum.

Blogs have, in many ways, revealed the vibrancy of online conversations in existing online communities. Blog interactions are conversations between websites rather than conversations within a website such as in a forum. For example, discussion in a forum is among forum members rather than between a forum member in one website and another forum member in another website, whereas conversation within a blog can either take place in the comment section of the blog or as a post that sends a trackback to another blog. As part of the process of creating a blog post, bloggers reference other posts and link to those posts in their own entries. This practice of linking between blog authors is a function of transparency between bloggers and part of the etiquette of effective blogging. Linking referenced material within a blog post can both add credibility to an author and ensure there are no accusations of plagiarism.

The cultural phenomenon of linking has an interesting and beneficial effect on blogs. Google and other search engines rank websites based upon content and the keywords contained within the websites. Search engines also rank websites based upon the number of websites that link to a given website or webpage. The more webpages that link to a site that also contains related content, the higher the rankings of the webpage in the search engine results. Blogging includes the process of referencing other blogger’s content that can link content to related content on another blog. This effectively gives any referenced blog content a vote of confidence but also a boost in popularity for a website’s search engine rankings. In contrast, this ability of bloggers to reference and gain a high ranking on a particular keyword in search engines is not as easily accomplished to the same extent within forums, as forum communication occurs within the forum so there are no links from other websites to help boost a page’s ranking for a keyword. Many forums have a lot of relevant content and a number of links. But the possibility of gaining link popularity from links between blogs is far greater within blogging communities compared with forums.

People who use email will receive unwanted spam and unsolicited messages. Blogs receive unwanted messages as well; automated software places sales and inappropriate messages in blog comments and sends trackbacks, with the aim of generating direct traffic and receiving links from the targeted blog. Because of the volume of spam comments and trackbacks on blogs, there has been a movement
to restrict the ability of links within comments and trackbacks to add to the popularity of blogs for search engine results. The no-follow tag was developed; here, a link will appear in the comment or trackback, but no benefit will be derived from the link, as the search engines ignore the link when crawling the blog because of the no-follow tag. Many blogging publishing platforms provide blog owners with the ability to turn on the no-follow tag for links and trackbacks in certain sections of a blog. This tag is having some effect in the face of trackback spam, but linking and popularity still plays a big role in the power to boost a website or blog to high rankings within search engine results.

CORPORATE BLOGS CONNECT WITH PEOPLE ONLINE

When a consumer publishes their opinion online, that opinion can be easily found by millions of fellow customers through search engines or word of mouth from friends and colleagues. Other people may consult those opinions when deciding if they should make a purchase; thus, the community of opinion has the power to significantly influence purchasing decisions. That is why it is so important for any company to monitor and be involved in blog customer conversations and, if necessary, to respond. The decisions about products are influenced by what consumers write about products in blogs.14

Blogs and forums provide opportunities for product feedback. For a product manager, forums can provide some of the best information on customer ideas and feedback. When a blogger includes the input of customers for product development, a blogger can receive feedback, more links, producing higher sales and turning customers into brand evangelists. Yet, a successful blogger relations campaign has some advantages over a forum. Blogs give companies the ability to interact between other blogs in a totally different way than the closed world of a forum. Blogs give companies many tools of interaction, such as commenting and trackbacks. By setting up a company blog, a company is open to conducting an online dialogue between consumers and bloggers. A company blogger is free to comment and trackback on blogs in the community, and other bloggers are free to comment on the company blog. If a company can run a successful blog, the company can gain links more easily than in a forum. A company also gains the opportunity to have a dialogue with many other blog readers from bloggers who refer to a company blog post. Blogs, in general, provide companies with more ways to connect with a wider audience and community as contrasted with the limitations of a forum, which is confined to a small but active proportion of their target audience.15

There is value to engaging your audience in industry forums if that is where the discussion is located. Because of the nature of search engines and the growth of blogging, a company has the ability to make a bigger impact on community
discussion by developing content on a blog. That is why it is so important for a company to be involved with both forums and blogs. Although not every audience member is going to click on a company blog, or find the blog, they may find the link on the company website to a forum. Lastly, communicating on a forum answers questions and shows active engagement in the community; you can do all that with blogs and, in addition, have the chance to easily connect with the wider community outside of a forum.

MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Media consumption has changed dramatically since the development of the Web and the Internet. Consumers are favoring the web because of the speed at which news is delivered and the flexibility to control how news is delivered through audio, video, text, and mobile devices. People also have the ability to participate in the news-gathering and news-making process through blogs and other social media websites. The change in media consumption means that new models of sponsorship and advertising will have to be developed to follow people as they switch from traditional media to new social media websites on the web.

A study by the Online Publisher's Association conducted by The Ball State University Center for Media Design, called “A Day in the Life: An Ethnographic Study of Media Consumption,” concluded that the web reached 62% of adults. This compares with 73% of adults being reached by radio, 91% of adults through TV, 39% of adults through newspapers, and 31% of adults by magazines. The changes to adult media consumption in terms of the web have been dramatic; the numbers for the web have gone from an estimated 10% in 1995 to more than 60% in 2005.16

Consumers are moving away from network TV to cable and local TV and away from newspapers and radio to the web. Young people are accessing news through the web and new devices. Technology is driving the changes in media consumption among the young. The Internet is becoming their primary source for news. Merrill Brown, in an article called “Abandoning the News” for the Carnegie Corporation of New York’s magazine the Carnegie Reporter, writes that the U.S. news industry is threatened because young people are moving away from traditional sources of news. The report was based on a survey of 18- to 34-year-olds conducted by Frank N. Magid Associates in May 2004.17

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press’ research report published in July 2006, “Online Papers Modestly Boost Newspaper Readership: Maturing Internet News Audience Broader Than Deep,”18 indicates the consumption of news has changed dramatically across media since the mid-1990s (see Figure 1.1).
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The Pew research indicates that the switch from traditional media to the web as a source for news is cutting across all ages of the population (see Figure 1.2). Advertising is not a dying medium, but it becomes more difficult to reach your customers through advertising because the audience is seeing so much.\textsuperscript{19,20} Basically, consumers are seeing more ads and, therefore, because of the high

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\textsuperscript{*}From 1994 \textsuperscript{^}From 1995

Source: The Pew Research Center

FIGURE 1.1 The Changing News Landscape.

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\textbf{Regularly get news online} & \textbf{2000} & \textbf{2006} & \textbf{Change} \\
\hline
\textbf{Total} & 23 & 31 & 8 \\
\hline
18–24 & 29 & 30 & 1 \\
25–29 & 31 & 42 & 11 \\
30–34 & 30 & 47 & 17 \\
35–49 & 25 & 37 & 12 \\
50–64 & 19 & 31 & 12 \\
65+  & 8  & 11  & 3  \\
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\end{tabular}

Source: The Pew Research Center

FIGURE 1.2 Online News Audience Grows Up.
volume of material, have a difficult time remembering the ads. This recall factor applies across all ages of people. The increase in both the amount of media consumption and volume of advertising competition gives an incentive to companies to find more efficient ways to reach customers. Companies should realize that advertising requires more money to achieve the same return on investment than just a few years ago.

People’s attention spans for advertising may be low, but their available attention span for content on blogs and online community groups are high. The reason is people have to proactively search for such content, and when they do find content that is highly relevant to them, they pay more attention to it. Companies, therefore, have an opportunity to reach consumers who will increasingly give them more of their attention in the new world of online social media.

Targeting people may actually be easier on the web, because you know fairly definitely that someone accessed a webpage using web statistics tracking software. However, even if media consumption has switched to new locations, it does not necessarily mean that advertising will work on new social media websites. Companies have to develop new approaches to reaching people in the new media. Blogger relations enables companies to connect with people not by selling but by demonstrating the value a company offers through listening to customers, thereby enabling an audience to contribute and participate in the development of a company’s products and brand.

CONSUMER-GENERATED MEDIA

All of the electronic content written by people on websites and the Internet may be called consumer-generated media, although some also call content generated in a community website web 2.0 content or, simply, writings by people. The growth of consumer-generated media has been highlighted by the growth of blogging. In 2006, most content developed by people online existed on websites other than blogs. Companies such as Cymfony, Umbria, and Nielsen BuzzMetrics, which provide analysis and monitoring of consumer-generated media, have all discovered that there is more forum content on the web to analyze than blog content. The phrase “consumer-generated media” also refers to the growing power of people to develop news directly instead of the traditional media found in print, radio, and TV, where professional journalists produce content for an audience’s consumption.

The content published by consumers on forums, websites, and blogs can now reach a mass audience through the web. The ability of consumers to publish their own content means that it is very easy for them to report on developing news stories, when once only traditional media organizations would have had the resources to publish content that could reach a mass audience. Recent dramatic examples of such citizen journalism include blog postings and photographs
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from the train bombings in Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005, respectively. Traditional media reporters, in their reports, used personal accounts, photographs, and videos shot at the scene of these events by people because the photographs and reports were eyewitnesses’ reports and provided the most up-to-date and best accounts of these stories.

It has now become commonplace for Internet users to look to the web for advice about products and companies. People talk with other consumers to compare and discuss products and vendors. TheKnot.com is a website dedicated to discussion about weddings and marriage. Although one opinion about a product might not influence a user’s decision on TheKnot, the combination of many voices in the forum influences a Knot member’s decision to purchase.

A video showing a consumer demonstrating how easy it was to open a Kryptonite lock with ballpoint pen had a dramatic impact on the Kryptonite Lock Company. The video was posted on the web, and the discussion about the problems with the Kryptonite lock produced no initial response from the Kryptonite Lock Company on the web. Later, the Kryptonite Lock Company recalled all of the locks at great expense. Blogs played a large role in critiquing Kryptonite for their lack of response and in spreading the story throughout blogging communities.

If a company wishes to alleviate any criticism on the web, they have to be involved in industry online conversations; blogging is one of the best ways to join those conversations. How you join the conversation will depend upon your level of success with your blogging efforts. One story about a company that succeeded in conducting effective blogging is how Macromedia changed their software development process because of the use of blogs.

MACROMEDIA CASE STUDY

Mike Chambers agreed to be interviewed for the Backbone Media Corporate Blogging Survey 2005; he was then senior product manager of developer relations at Macromedia. Subsequently, Macromedia merged with Adobe Corporation. Mike Chambers’ blog can be found at http://weblogs.macromedia.com/mesh/. Macromedia was a successful software technology company with many well-known products, including Flash and Cold Fusion.

Macromedia started to blog in 2002 to build a better sense of community and get information to customers quickly. Blogging completely changed the way in which Macromedia conducted its software development process. Slowly, through trial and error, Macromedia determined how to best make the process work. The whole process of using blogs to communicate with customers for the development of new products was a huge success, in terms of better products, more committed customers, more sales, and positive public relations results.
Customers gave input through blogs on feature suggestions. As time passed, Macromedia started to ask what features customers wanted, and those requests began to appear in new versions of products, which were announced on company blogs. The Macromedia programmers would discuss openly on their blogs what needed to be done and reported back to customers if they were able to make any suggested customer changes. Macromedia developed its understanding of how blogging would help their company to get more information from their customers on product development.

If customers are involved in the process of software product development, it changes their perception of the process. Rather than being a case of them versus us, involvement in the process empowers people, and customers start thinking of themselves as part of the Macromedia team. Chambers said, “The customers feel more vested in the whole development process; they have more ownership.”

Marketing is not just about promoting a product and making a sale. Forums can help companies build better products through online discussion; similarly, corporate blogs can also provide a mechanism for customer feedback and ideas. The editorial control of corporate blogs and an effective blogging effort can give a company a unique opportunity to demonstrate its brand online by demonstrating that it can provide value and keep promises with its customers.

**WHY BLOGGING IS ABOUT MARKETING**

Marketing is not just about promotion; the marketing concept is also about discovering the needs and wants of a customer. As the Macromedia case study illustrates, a lot of marketing is about understanding your customer’s needs and wants and making sure that you build a product that satisfies those needs and wants efficiently and profitably. Research on blogging\textsuperscript{24,25} indicates it is not a good idea for a corporate blogger to focus solely on the blogger discussing their products and services extensively, rather the better blogging strategy is to discuss customer issues and concerns. If a company receives customer feedback and improves its product in response to that feedback, the company will also have improved its brand online. When the customer helps develop the product, customers are more likely to evangelize a product and brand.

If a company does not engage its customers, they will not know that there exists the opportunity to make additional profit and satisfy a number of customers. Use a blog for customer feedback and discussion about products and services and you will help to build your brand online as the Macromedia case study demonstrates. Every customer request received should not mean a change in product design, but it is important to explain why a design change is not possible. Your customers will typically respect your reasons for not making the change.
Marketing is a planning process, and each company has to decide how to get the most return from marketing dollars. Blogs are a good way to connect with customers but might not be the best way for every company. That is why it is important for a company to conduct research into their blogging community to determine if blogging is an opportunity for their company and is right for them.

THE AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY BLOGGING COMMUNITY

To underscore the need for conducting an effective blogging campaign by a company, it is helpful to review an example of an industry where there is a need for engagement through corporate blogs. The automobile industry is one industry where there is an active blogging community. To understand what drives the development of corporate blogs for automobile manufacturers, a review of the automobile blogging community is necessary. Chapter 9 of this book describes the automobile blogging community in more detail. In the fall of 2006, after reviewing the content of a number of automobile blogs, it quickly became apparent that there are currently three themes of discussion in the automobile blogging industry:

1. A description of a car from the perspective of its drivability, style, power, and value;
2. The current state of the green-car industry, what companies are doing or not doing to help reduce energy consumption and pollution emissions;
3. How badly General Motors and Ford are running their affairs in terms of product development, marketing, and everything else.

Reviewing a blogging community to understand what content is being generated demonstrates the need or lack of opportunity for an effective company blogging effort. The review of the automobile community indicates several opportunities for discussion within the community. When other customers see that a company is communicating with a customer about their concerns and issues in a public blog, the help a company provides to an individual customer is not just solving a customer service issue but helping to strengthen a company’s brand in the perception of the readers.

WHY BLOGGER RELATIONS?

If the best way to connect with consumers through traditional media was advertising and public relations, in the new era of consumer-generated media, the best way to connect with consumers and corporate clients who write on
blogs is by running a corporate blog. Traditional marketing and public relations tactics are not always the best way to connect with bloggers, especially consumer bloggers. Rather, blogger relations is the best way to connect with bloggers, that is, the process of connecting with peers and audience through blogs to develop relevant content that delivers your message and demonstrates your brand through content and action.\textsuperscript{26}

Blogger relations is the opportunity to have a direct conversation with someone through a blog. The open nature of that communication puts constraints and opens up opportunities for both participants. Companies will not succeed with blogging unless their bloggers understand it is more important to build a connection with an audience rather than trying to sell the reader something. A real conversation is what blogging is all about, which is greatly ironic because by not selling you succeed in promoting your brand.

In the traditional setting of media relations, you would never see public relations professionals critiquing a journalist in a conversation where they are pitching a story. With blogging, there are some new rules in how you engage people who are part of online media. It is helpful for companies to distinguish between the conduct of public relations and blogger relations.\textsuperscript{27} Blogger relations can include the process of conducting media relations, which I narrowly define as the process of connecting with a member of the media to pitch a story. However, to be truly effective, blogger relations is the process of building relationships, leadership, and a presence in a blogging community by writing posts and conducting a dialogue with fellow bloggers in their community.

The concept of blogger relations\textsuperscript{28} is a combination of different skills sets, some of which include public relations. Some of the characteristics of public relations\textsuperscript{29} led me to think that public relations will play an important future role as each new technology has opened new opportunities for communication; those characteristics are the following:

- Public relations people have to defend their brand constantly in the media marketplace on a daily basis with journalists; this previous experience of the rigors of the communications market prepares public relations people more than anyone else to our evolving media society.
- Public relations people have to convince journalists and other stakeholders that their story is important to the journalists’ and stakeholders’ market, selling their story on value to the journalists’ audience. The net is the same; website marketers have to provide value or their audience and customers move on to the next site.
- The media world has changed; news is delivered 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and the Internet is the reason for that change. Traditional public relations powered by Internet tools will be one of few ways to manage the communications pressures to publish quickly and well in the 21st century.
• Public relations strategy focus is on unique characteristics that interest audiences; this approach is the right one for online audiences and how people find information on the web using search engines.

The skills needed for effective blogging in a corporate setting include expertise from many professions: writing, journalism, Internet marketing, public relations, product management and customer service, and many other disciplines. Companies have different goals for blogging, including leadership, customer service, product development, and more. Product development is definitely not public relations, and that is just one reason why effective blogger relations do go beyond public relations. In fact, some of the best returns for blogging come from product development. Macromedia was a great example of a company that used blogs for gaining feedback from their customers and in the process gained public relations and immediate promotional benefits from following a product development dialogue with their customers.

Taking the concept of blogger relations as the way a company can conduct effective blogging, this book will provide strategies and tools for how effective blogging can be implemented within your company and even look beyond blogging to the future of social media websites.

Endnotes

1. Email interview with Tom Abate, news reporter for the Sfgate.com during November 2006
2. PR Communications Blog (2005), Intel PR Case Study. Available at http://pr.typepad.com/pr_communications/2005/05/intel_pr_case_s.html
3. Derived from the original French name for the organization—Conseil Europeen pour la Recherche Nucleaire, the organization known since 1954 as the European Organization for Nuclear Research (located on the French/Swiss border in Europe)