

The Power of Blogging for Business

Recently quite a few people have asked me about blogging and its specific value for businesses. Glad you asked! Blogs are a terrific way to get any organization to tell its story.

Blogs also allow you to take content in different directions that will appeal to specific target demographics without negatively impacting the strategy and content of your primary Web site. As a way to experiment, to test new ideas, or to reach narrow niche markets, smart marketers use highly focused blogs. If your experiment fails, you can simply shut down the blob with little or no negative effect on your main site.

With all the political blog hype during the 2004 election cycle, many observers missed the quieter emergence of blogs in the business world. My guess is that we're just getting going here and that business blogs will grow rapidly in numbers and importance. I'd predict that before long blogs will be recognized as communication tools used by organizations to reach external audiences.

Why? Well for one thing, blogging is so darned easy. Companies large and small appreciate the rapid set-up and easy-to-use features of blogs to reach both external and internal constituents. In 2004, I might have dismissed business blogging as wishful thinking propagated by early adopters and blogging service providers. But there's enough evidence in the form of both interesting examples and excitement from users to suggest that we're on the cusp of a phenomenon.

Why blogging has a negative connotation as a tool for business

Elements of big media get their collective knickers in a twist because they insist on comparing blogs to traditional media. When they write stories about business blogging they tend to focus on the negative. We hear stories about an employee getting fired for having a blog. Or we have weird articles about blogs compared to newspapers. Guess what? Blogs and traditional media are different! It is not one vs. another: Blogs and big media can and should coexist.

Big media writes stories with titles such as "Blogs haven't displaced media" because many journalists continue to think of the Web as a sprawling online newspaper, which justifies their need to (negatively) compare blogging to what they do. The metaphor of the Web as a newspaper is inaccurate on many levels, particularly when trying to understand blogs. It is better to think of the Web as a huge city teeming with individuals and blogs as the sounds of independent voices just like the street corner soapbox preacher or that friend of yours who always recommends the best books.

While many traditional publishers have maintained a defensive "not real journalism" attitude towards the unedited, free-form nature of blogs, forward-thinking publishers have gotten into the game. Blogs such as Fast Company Now (<http://blog.fastcompany.com>) and Inc. Magazine's Fresh Inc. (<http://blog.inc.com>) provide a forum for magazine writers, columnists, editors, and occasional guest contributors to share thoughts. Writers appreciate having an alternative outlet to post ideas

and issues that are timelier than a print publication's production schedule can handle or that may not warrant a full-blown article on a magazine Web site.

Research firms covering IT and content have started to use blogs to regularly update clients. JupiterResearch maintains a blog farm (<http://weblogs.jupiterresearch.com>) where a dozen Jupiter analysts create live coverage in their areas of expertise. Charlene Li, Forrester's principal analyst on the Devices, Media & Marketing team, keeps her clients and other interested people continually updated (<http://forrester.typepad.com>).

CEOs are getting into the act too, supplying corporate info as well as snippets about their thoughts and actions. Alacra CEO Steve Goldstein has been writing for nearly a year (www.alacrablog.com) and Alan Meckler, CEO of Jupitermedia does his thing at (<http://weblogs.jupitermedia.com/meckler>). There's a bit of a voyeuristic nature when reading about the details of a CEO's life but in a way it is a return to blogging's roots as a Web journal for individuals. (I first encountered a blog in 2001 when Googling the title of my first book, *Eyeball Wars*. Someone had blogged her thoughts about it). A CEO discussing the conference keynote they just gave is not so unlike a twenty-something chronicling life with her companion animal and the novels she's reading.

Another area to watch is the use of blogs in marketing and customer service applications. Imagine a regularly updating forum for active users of software products to share information. Of course, thousands of discussion forums on the Web already exist, but almost all are independent of the companies and products that are written about. For a fun example of what's possible, check out Stonyfield Farm, a maker of organic yogurt. The company currently operates four blogs, and my personal favorite is The Bovine Bugle (www.stonyfield.com/weblog/bovinebugle/index.html), which tells the story the cows of Stonyfield Farm. It may not be easy to think of things to write about, and we don't all have something as photogenic as cows to post, but I suspect that the herd of blogs will grow, as many new ones are launched to help support diverse business objectives.

The good news is that it's really simple to set up a blog. I set up the basics of my blog Web Ink Now (www.webinknow.com) in TypePad (www.typepad.com) in just a few hours and I have no HTML or technical skills. Other services such as Google's Blogger (www.blogger.com) are just as easy. The two things that take a little more time are creating a masthead at the top (I had the one for Web Ink Now professionally designed) and mapping from TypePad to your own URL.

What are you waiting for?