

What a Blog can do for your Business

Expert knowledge means success

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Note: This publication has not been updated since it was last published. Some of the hyperlinks may have changed and may need updating. In addition, some of the information in this publication may be out of date.

Introduction

The roots of blogging can be traced back to the mid 1990's but didn't really take off until 1999. The original 'weblogs' were online journals but have over the years evolved into more sophisticated sites with current web content, articles and facilities for posting questions and comments accessed through the familiar browser interface.

Personal blogs are very popular and can be found on almost every imaginable subject. In recent years, businesses have discovered that a blog is a powerful way to regularly communicate in a more informal manner with customers and employees, to keep them up to date with industry developments, or highlight interesting features of products. Unlike traditional media that require lead time for publishing, blogs are frequently updated, often daily, online journals of opinions, information and links to interesting content online.

Today, blogs are used by politicians, news providers, consultants, businesses and individuals as a means of communicating with a wide audience. They are ubiquitous and increasingly influential. During the December 2004 Tsunami the Medecins Sans Frontieres blog used SMS text messaging to report from affected areas in Sri Lanka and Southern India. The Guardian newspaper now includes a daily digest of blogs and in June 2006, BBC News launched a blog for its editors, following in the footsteps of other news companies.

What is a Blog?

A blog is an online message board, typically covering a chosen subject area. Contributions are organised by date with the most recent contributions at the top. Visitors to the blog can comment on other entries, pose a question, or simply express a view.

A blog is simply a website. As with other websites, it requires an IP address and a domain name to be accessed. It therefore needs to be hosted on a web server like any other website.

Blogs are typically single pages of text with little or no graphics, making them very easy to create and update with minimal storage requirements. Their innate simplicity and low cost has led a number of hosting providers to offer free blogging services (sometimes in return for advertisement) and software that allow a user to create and update a blog without any technical knowledge. Most of these services provide some sort of index to help you draw readers to your blog.

The Business Benefits

A business blog provides a small business with an opportunity to communicate with a wide audience. Business blogs typically provide news, usually about the specific topic relevant to the company. But blogs can be an informal way to get product feedback, promote products and services to existing and potential customers and share knowledge. Where a blog is part of a company website, the increase in web traffic can help to market the company's products.

A blog can be a cheap alternative to having a web presence. Small business owners without the technical expertise or the financial resources to create a website can take advantage of a free blog creator service, in order to establish some level of web presence. Companies with an established website may choose to implement a blog as part of their existing site. Updating a blog is a quicker and simpler process than updating a website which can be undertaken by an employee with little technical knowledge. A blog with its fresh content gives your customers a reason to return to your website. A business can choose to manage multiple blogs covering different topics or different business functions as suits.

A blog can be a powerful marketing tool. By their nature, the entries tend to be short, full of keywords and often include links. This not only makes them easy and quick to read, but also makes them popular with search engines and may increase the ranking of your blog or website, in turn increasing the traffic to your website.

A blog can be used to host common questions and answers so that your customers can find the information they require at their fingertips, rather than have to contact a customer support function. Additional

"Business blogs... can offer organisations a platform where information, data, and opinion can be shared and traded among employees, customers, partners, and prospects in a way previously impossible: a two-way, open exchange".

*Kathleen Goodwin,
CEO of iMakeNews*

questions and answers can be posted as required to keep the information current.

Making your blog work

To receive and maintain exposure for your blog, consider the following:

Establish and maintain specific content

Determine a topic area and keep to it; this will allow you to create loyal readers and contributors.

Maintain accuracy and currency

Ensure that the information you post is factually accurate and current. Take time to proof read and sanity check your entries.

Maintain an update schedule

Readers will expect your blog to be updated on a regular basis. If it isn't, your readership will go elsewhere. As a bonus, if your blog content is updated frequently, search engines will crawl it more frequently.

Keep it simple

Entries should be short and simple and free of isolating terms and expressions.

Make it search engine friendly

Include relevant keywords in the title of the blog and in each entry posted. Archive previous postings to establish a history of similarly-themed content.

A blog can be used to host promotions, games or competitions that encourage your visitors to return. It could include "What's new" information, or details on future ventures to gauge interest and feedback on planned products. Photos can also be included.

A business blog can be used internally to communicate with employees. Information can be distributed to all employees simultaneously and employees can respond to it in an informal fashion. It can be used to educate and inform employees as well as to gather feedback on social or employment matters.

Blogs provide great supplemental content and direct attention to areas of your business that you want to showcase; you direct the content but let your readers guide you.

Targeted banner advertising can help your business make money from your blog in the same way as adverts on a website. Alternatively, you could consider promoting other sites and their products in return for commission when a customer buys the item after following a link from your blog. But there are downsides. The employee responsible for the blog must be chosen with care. They need to devote time to updating the blog, without getting carried away.

Too frequent updating may use a lot of employee time. Too little updating can make the site seem stale and unresponsive. The employee must also be able to strike a balance between a formal corporate voice and a personal voice.

A blog positions your company as a technologically current company. It is now expected that any successful company will have a website. It may not be long before that expectation extends to blogs.

Creating a Blog

As with any successful project, the creation of a blog needs to be planned. You need to determine what you are going to write about; how you are going to attract readers and contributors, how often you are going to update the blog and so on.

The next step is to create the site. Blogging software is easy to use. Blog software companies such as, Movable Type (www.movabletype.org), Blogger (www.blogger.com) and Typepad (www.typepad.com) all offer easy blogging tools to get started. After typing an entry, the publication of your blog is a few clicks away.

Blogger provides free tools and hosting and is covered in more detail below. Livejournal.com (www.livejournal.com) and Xanga.com (www.xanga.com) provide similar free services. These services are cheap and ideal for simple blogs, but they may be limiting if you have more sophisticated requirements, for example if you require a database so that you can re-use the content. You are also restricted to the tools that the service provides and are reliant on their server availability.

If you decide to host your blog with your website hoster you will need to determine the server side scripting offered by your hoster – PHP, Perl etc. before choosing blog creation software. Some applications may also require a database such as MySQL. This may prove more complicated but you will have flexibility in how you use your blog site. Tools such as Blogger are also useful if you are tied to a hoster that doesn't offer any server side scripting capabilities as they will host the blog as a separate entity from your other website/s.



Blog popularity soars

According to a report by Universal McCann released in March 2008

- 184 million web users have started a blog
- 346 million users read blogs

Blogger

Blogger is the best known and probably the easiest to use of all the combination blog update/free hosting sites. It has been so successful that it has now been bought by Google. One of its useful features is its support for third-party blog sites. This allows you to set up and update a weblog on your own website using Blogger without using their hosting service.

There are three simple steps to creating a basic blog:

- Create an account;
- Name the blog;
- Choose a template.

Blogger claims that the whole process takes less than 5 minutes to complete. After creating a new entry Blogger sends it as HTML pages via FTP to either their own or your web server.

Blogger provides support for two way communication, group communication and remote update through a variety of services:

- Blogger Comments allows worldwide readers to comment on a posted entry. Comments can be allowed or disallowed on a post-by-post basis (and can be deleted if you so choose);
- Group Blogs allow small teams, families, or other groups to communicate with each other in a shared space;
- Blogger Profiles let you find people and blogs that share your interests. And your profile lets people find you (but only if you so choose);
- Post photos allows you to upload photos in the Blogger interface. Just click the photo button to upload a photo from your computer or from a web address;
- Blogger Mobile lets you send photos and text straight to your blog by sending a message to go@blogger.com from your phone. (This service is currently only available in the US);
- Mail-to-Blogger is a similar service that is available in the UK and allows e-mail to be sent straight to your blog;
- AudioBlogger allows you to call Blogger from any phone and leave a message that is immediately posted to your site as an MP3 audio file.

Promoting a blog

To fulfil its function a business blog needs to be read. As with websites, you can submit the blog to be listed through blog listing services. Some examples are:

<http://blo.gs>
<http://www.karmadirectorysubmission.com/blog-directories.html>

You can configure your publishing software to notify www.weblogs.com the moment content is published, which in turn will automatically notify subscribers that new content has been posted to your blog.

The more interesting and informative your blog is, the more repeat traffic you are likely to see. Obviously if you are using a blog to impart information that clients cannot access elsewhere, this will also guarantee traffic. If you want to keep your readers, don't let them down. Decide on your content and an update schedule and stick to it, so your readers know what to expect and when to expect it.

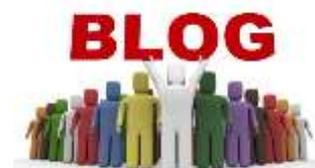
Blogs that allow readers to post comments will receive more visits as this increases the chance of repeat visits (and can lead to valuable feedback).

Blog search engines

Although your target audience may be your existing customers, potential customers may be attracted to your blog if its content results in it being positively selected by a search engine. There are numerous websites that act as "blog search engines", which you can submit your blog to in order to increase your exposure and your page ranking. You can also create an RSS feed in order to syndicate blog content and gain additional exposure.

There are several blog search engines which can be used to search blog contents and find a blog that meets a reader's interest. These include:

Blogdigger (www.blogdigger.com)
Technorati (www.technorati.com)
Blogsearch (<http://blogsearch.google.com>)
Blogger (<http://search.blogger.com>)



Blog search

Blog Search uses Google search technology to find either specific posts or entire blogs. The main search results always return links to posts. However, when there are entire blogs that seem to be a good match for your query, these will appear in a short list just above the main search results. The results include all blogs found, not just those published through Blogger – Google's free blog creation service. It includes an "Advanced Search" facility which includes options to specify titles, authors, languages and other search criteria. The results can be presented in date or relevance order.

Blog Search indexes blogs by their site feeds, which are checked frequently for new content. If you use a blog creation service – such as Blogger - the blog will publish a site feed and automatically ping an updating service (such as Google Blog Search Pinging Service) that will enable Blog Search to find and list the blog. A form is planned that will allow a blog to be automatically added to Blog Search's index.

If you do not publish a site feed for your blog, it will not be included in Blog Search. Blog Search also respects robots.txt files and NOINDEX, NOFOLLOW meta tags.

RSS feeds

RSS (Rich Site Summary/Really Simple Syndication) is a format for delivering regularly changing web content. Using RSS, webmasters can put their content into a standardized format, which can be viewed through RSS-aware software or displayed as new content on another website. Many news-related sites, weblogs and other online publishers syndicate their content as an RSS feed to whoever requests it. Sites providing a feed often display a small icon with the acronyms RSS, XML, or RDF to let you know a feed is available.

RSS allows readers to easily stay informed by retrieving summaries of the latest content from the sites they are interested in. They save time by not needing to visit each site individually and they retain a degree of privacy by not having to join each site's e-mail newsletter. The number of sites offering RSS feeds is growing rapidly and includes well known suppliers such as Yahoo News and Amazon.com.

Programs known as RSS feed readers or aggregators can check a list of feeds on behalf of a user and display any updated articles that they find. A variety of RSS feed readers are available for different platforms including FeedReader (Windows), and NewsGator (Windows - integrated with Outlook). Many browsers now have integrated support for RSS feeds.

RSS feeds can therefore be used to include fresh content for your web pages from news providers or other relevant information providers. Additionally, by providing an RSS feed from your blog, you provide a popular access method that may not be provided by your competitors.

Blog Tools

There are now hundreds of blogging tools available to help you collect visitor statistics, edit your content, integrate news and other feeds, create newsletters and surveys and much more. A comparative newcomer to the blogging scene is Wordpress: Wordpress is now one of the most popular open-source blogging, publishing and content management systems, with a deep plugin and theme architecture that allows for limitless possibilities.

www.microsoft.com/web/wordpress?wt.mc_id=src-n-gb-Non-loc-F7-NonGA
<http://wordpress.org/>

Statistics Packages and Metrics Tools

These are tools that collect information and data about your site's audience. They can provide a clear picture of who is visiting your site, how they found you, where they came from, what interests them and much more.

Examples can be found at:

<http://sitemeter.com/>
www.google.com/analytics/
<http://performancing.com/>
www.awstats.sourceforge.net
www.haveamint.com
www.mrunix.net/webalizer
www.statcounter.com
www.wettone.com/code/slimstat

Blog Editor Tools

Blog Editor tools allow you to write and manage content for your blog. They often allow you to work offline, spell check your entry, add attachments, create links and so on. Examples can be found at:

<http://ecto.kung-foo.tv>
www.qumana.com



<http://www.codingrobots.com/blogjet/>
www.zoundry.com
<http://www.blogdesk.org/en/index.htm>
www.bytescout.com/post2blog.html
http://performancing.com/firefox_2_0_0_15_released/
<http://www.red-sweater.com/marsedit/>

News Aggregators and News Sourcing Tools

As mentioned in the RSS section, there are a number of tools that can check a list of news feeds on behalf of a user and display any updated articles that they find; in effect you can browse your favourite websites in one page.

Examples can be found at:

www.bloglines.com
www.newsgator.com
www.technorati.com
www.google.com/reader/view
www.aignes.com
www.blogbridge.com
www.rojo.com/today
www.memeorandum.com
<http://netnewswireapp.com/>

Email Subscription Tools and Newsletter Services

These tools allow you to automatically create newsletters from your blog, send newflashes, auto respond to subscriptions, and much more.

Examples can be found at:

www.feedblitz.com
www.aweber.com
<http://www.rssfwd.com/index.aspx>
<https://accounts.google.com/ServiceLogin?service=feedburner>

Blog Poll Tools

These tools allow you to set up surveys and embed them into your blog.

Examples can be found at:

www.blogpolls.com
www.vizu.com/index.htm
www.freeblogpoll.com
www.blogpoll.com/poll
<http://polss.blogflux.com>

Lists of other types of blog utilities can be found at

www.dmoz.org/Computers/Internet/On_the_Web/Weblogs/Tools/

Blogging and your Employees

By their very nature, blogs encourage individuals to write personal opinions. While this can prove great value, it can also be detrimental or even defamatory if the individual voicing the opinion is regarded as a representative of your company.

It is therefore in the interests of both your business and your employees to have a well publicised policy on blogging and the content of any submissions. One of the most popular blogging topics is work, and despite the existence of non-disclosure agreements between businesses and their employees, there have been cases of company sensitive information being disclosed inadvertently or otherwise through blogs.

Additionally, blogging can be fun and addictive and employees should be made aware that company property and time should be used judiciously.



Recommended Reading

- *Creating a Web Page and Blog* by Paul McFedries, Mikal E. Belicove, published by Alpha Books, ISBN: 1592572677.
- *The Weblog Handbook: Practical Advice on Creating and Maintaining Your Blog* by Rebecca Blood, published by Perseus Books, ISBN: 073820756X.
- *Blogging for Dummies* by Brad Hill, published by Hungry Minds Inc., U.S., ISBN: 0471770841.
- *The Corporate Blogging Book* by Debbie Weil, published by Piatkus Books, ISBN: 0749927437.
- *Start Your Own Blogging Business, Second Edition*, by Jason R. R. Rich (Author), Entrepreneur Press (Author), published by Entrepreneur Press, ISBN-10: 1599183765.
- *The B2B Social Media Book: Become a Marketing Superstar by Generating Leads with Blogging, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, email, and More* [Hardcover], by Kipp Bodnar (Author), Jeffrey L. Cohen (Author), published by John Wiley & Sons, ISBN-10: 1118167767.
- *Business Blogging for Beginners* [Kindle Edition], by Helen Lindop, published by the author, ASIN: B005L9UPUA.



Further Information

This guide is for general interest - it is always essential to take advice on specific issues.

We believe that the facts are correct as at the date of publication, but there may be certain errors and omissions for which we cannot be responsible

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