

A Blogging Marketer!

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Blogs are beginning to be used as a business communications tool.
Never heard of them? You soon will.

The emergence of blogs in providing low-cost, two-way communications with clients and customers will change the nature of online marketing as we know it. There will be less talking 'at' and more talking 'with'; less 'buy my stuff' and more 'how can we better serve your needs?' Marketers will have no choice but to drop the spin and communicate honestly with their customers. Customers won't tolerate anything less. This is the view of Andy Bourland (from an article in Technology Marketing Newsletter), one of the most knowledgeable commentators on the Internet Marketing scene. Google, an organisation respected for its Internet savvy, thinks they are going to be important. They recently purchased Pyra, one of the leading providers of Blogging facilities. Anita Roddick (founder of Body Shop) has got one, so has Seth Goodwin (author of Permission Marketing) - even Dick Stroud has got one.

So what is a blog, what can you do with them and why are they important to Marketing?

What is a blog?

Blog is the shortened name for a weblog. In the beginning, around 1998, the weblog was a web site that an individual would update with their personal thoughts, observations and web links. Something like an on-line diary the whole world could read.

The widely accepted definition of weblog is ‘a web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual and is typically updated daily with content that is likely to reflect the personality of the author’. If you want to see the comprehensive definition of a weblog then look at the article ‘what makes a weblog a weblog’ (Harvard Law School)

Most people use the term blog, rather than Weblog. Not only does it sound more fun but it reduces the confusion with the term ‘Web log’, the report for showing the activity of a Web site. During the last 5 years the blog world underwent rapid growth.

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Initially each blog was a hand-crafted web site. Not surprisingly the content tended to be about technical subjects and somewhat geeky. This

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changed as companies like Pyra, Greymatter and Moveable Type launched blogging services and software that made it possible for the technically-challenged to create and maintain their own blogs. If you need to be convinced how simple it is, go to www.blogger.com and you can have a blog, up and running, within 5 minutes. And, it is free.

The development that propelled the blog from its geeky origins, to the attention of the public, is the mainstream media’s use of them as sources of information. An individual who is focusing on a very narrow area of news is very likely to become aware of potential news stories before the traditional media. The unsavoury exploits of politicians, the vagaries of reporting the Israel-Palestine conflict and of course the last Iraq war have created news scoops on blogs that were then reported by the print and TV news services.

Blog software and service providers soon extended their functionality to enable groups of people to contribute their comments to the same blog. This solitary, rather self-indulgent, communications tool is now a sophisticated means for groups of people to provide and receive information. At this point I could confuse us all by talking about a couple of other developments that are allied to the blog, the Wiki and RSS. Both of these are relevant to marketing, but I think they can wait for another article.

What can you do with them?

This is like trying to answer ‘what can I do with a web site?’ Answer, just about anything. As I have already said, most blogs have been used by individuals to tell the world about themselves, their views and observations.

Predictably, the blog is evolving as different groups, both personal and corporate, use it for their own purposes. The Eatonweb portal, a good source of blogs, has over

12,000 listed in different categories. Google has a facility to search its blog directory by keyword - there are over 300 listed under marketing.

Politicians are using them as a communications tool. Tom Watson (Labour MP) was an early adopter of blogs and has seen his Web visibility rise to become the top of the list when you search Google for the term 'Labour MP'. Eat your heart out Mr. Blair. The business application of blogs is attracting a lot of attention and is what I am sure will interest most marketers

Three things that happen when an idea comes of age. First it gets a special name. Business blogs are now known as b-blogs. They get their own discussion group - one has just started on the Adventive Web site. Finally, conferences are held about the subject. The first b-blog conference took place in June this year, hosted by ClickZ. So let's have a look and see how they can be used by marketers.

Why are they important to marketing?

It is still very early days for b-blogs and their marketing applications. That being said, there are obvious ways they can extend a company's communications reach.

Extending the scope of Newsletters. The first reaction to a b-blog is that it will do away with the need for e-newsletters. I think the opposite will occur. It is very easy to supplement a newsletter with a series of blogs from the contributing writers. The blogs could provide readers with a regular flow of thinking from the writers that would satisfy a very different need than the weekly or monthly collection of articles.

Increasing the visibility of the company's specialist knowledge and skills. For many companies it is the skill and reputation of their knowledge experts that provides their competitive edge. They currently gain visibility by conferences speaking, authoring 'white papers' and being quoted in the media. The b-blog provides a way for these experts to engage direct and regularly with the company's customers.

Dialogue with customers. We know the power of customers to influence prospective customers. The b-blog, containing both customer and company contributors, is potentially a very powerful tool. Of course there are potential dangers when you provide a voice for your customers. I guess it depends how confident you are in the positive tone of their views and if you can retain editorial control of the content!

Providing a 'personal voice' of the company. This use of the b-blog is particularly relevant to companies that compete on the knowledge and reputation of their staff, for example professional services companies. As well as the corporate web site a company can display its professional excellence by also providing a b-blog where its staff can provide the personal commentary. Snark Hunting (produced by branding consultants at Igor International) and Jupiter Research Analysts (produced by the Jupiter Research's market forecasters) show this application in action.

Internal communications. Intranets are great for providing access to a company's information in a structured and hierarchical manner. They are not very good at enabling individuals, or groups of individuals, within the organisation to have their own voice. The b-blog format is ideally suited to this task. In a similar way to previous point, it provides the company with a means of having a 'personal' as well as a corporate face.

I would like to acknowledge the excellent article by Kathleen Goodwin 'putting b-blogs into action' that first identified some of these applications.

Personal experience

Ten days ago I decided to create a blog to help support my interest in marketing to the 50+ consumer. These personal observations might be of interest to anybody thinking of using a blog.

I decided to take a 'fast start' approach and use one of the leading suppliers of blogging services, blogger.com. Their basic service is free and is easy to use. It is like

You can have your blog up and running in 5 minutes. But have you got anything interesting to say?

creating a PowerPoint presentation, using a standard template.

Now I have the basic blog I can adapt it and if I want combine with my Web site.

Google, the owner of the company, has provided a superb feature on its Google Tool bar that enables me to view a web site and to then to 'cut and paste' its contents directly into my blog. OK, enough about the technical side of things.

What are the marketing advantages?

- ❖ Already the site is the first item on Google for anybody searching on 50plus marketing
- ❖ I have been able to quickly create a site that displays the interest and knowledge I have in this area of marketing
- ❖ I have been able to recruit 10 other people, interested in contributing their input
- ❖ I am creating a source of information that will be useful in my consultancy and training activities.
- ❖ It has already generated leads for potential consultancy assignments

This has cost me nothing other than my time. I suspect that it would do rather well if I were to calculate the ROI! There is an argument that says that blogs are a transitory phase of web site development. Maybe that is true. They provide a radically new channel for communication that gives a voice to the individual that can be harnessed to benefit the organisation. Happy blogging.

Links referenced in the article

Anita Roddick www.anitaroddick.com/index.jsp
Seth Goodwin www.sethgodin.com/sg/blog/sethgodin.html
Dick Stroud www.50plus.blogspot.com
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Pyra (now owned by Google) www.blogger.com
Moveable Type www.movabletype.org/
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