

Blogs...Can They Help My Business?

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If you have read a newspaper, business magazine or listened to the news, you've learned about the newest technology rage – blogging. Regardless of which source you want to quote (Intelliseek, Technorati, Perseus or Nielsen/NetRatings), the numbers are significant. On the low side, there are 12,650,073 identified blogs – on the high side over 31 million¹. According to some estimates there are 20,000 new blogs being created daily. For those of you who watch trends, the blogging phenomena should not a surprise. It was the next logical step to consumer generated media. All the market needed was an easy way to make themselves heard and blogs delivered on this need. The result of all this cyber talk is what I like to call *Word of Mouth on Steroids* – *Blogging!*

The blogging communities are fostering conversations, building connections and creating new relationships faster than any medium has ever done. So for owners of small and big companies the question is very simple - how do I, my company employees and my strategic business partners join in on this conversation and what can we learn if we truly listen?

Blogs-What Are They & How Do They Work

Think of a blog as an easy to create web site which you, your company and your customers can create with NO technical programming skills. Free or inexpensive blog building software provides “look and feel” templates for you to use in building your blog, and simple tutorials (plus a few emails to support) get you up and running quickly. For *Interpret-Her's* blog (www.interpret-her.typepad.com) we use Typepad, but there are a host of other products that can be used (BlogSpot, Xanga, Moveable Type...).

Traditional blogs allow you to make comments and receive uncensored comments from your readers on any topic you and your readers choose to write about. You can include photos and “talk” to other bloggers through a Trackback which acts much like your “cc” function in email – letting another blogger know that you are *talking* about his/her blog postings.

Most Blogs include a Calendar or Archive of all past posts; a permanent web address for each post called a Permalink and allows readers to post comments. And if you wish, you can have multiple authors on your blog. Mary, my partner who lives in LA, contributes to our company's blog as do I.

One last thing you need to understand. There are thousands of blogs on many different topics. Just like you have identified and bookmarked your favorite web sites on your computer, you can go to an aggregator site (a site which has cataloged blogs into like subject matter) and register your favorite blogs. The aggregator will notified you by email when the blog has a new post. This is done through an RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feed. All you really need to know is that makes finding the newest information on a topic you are interested in very easy. Each morning I receive an email with all the new postings from my favorite blogs and a short description of each from the aggregator I use –FeedBlitz. I scan the email for anything interesting and click on the link to view the entire new posting. What a time saver!

Look Whose Blogging!

In May, 2005 Nielson Net Rating NetView completed a comprehensive blog survey and some very interesting things came out of that study. Women make up 43% of the bloggers, versus males at 57% (a gap that will close just like it did with female Internet usage). However, there is another key trend that is important to look closely at....in the under 17 market, girls are the

majority of bloggers. No surprise when you think about it, kids and teens love talking up a storm. Between the 17-24 age cohort girls are tied in the blogging race with the guys. These young women won't abandon blogging as they age, but will expect its presence in the products and services they choose to have a relationship with. Add to this the sheer volume of women in the Gen X and Boomer markets (both groups, more active bloggers than the coveted Madison Avenue demo of 24-35), and you can see women have cast their vote for blogging. Technology has given the women a medium which allows them to say what they want, when they want to and in their own way. It has given them a way to build the communities they thrive in, make opinion giving and sharing easy and empowered them as never before.

Is Their Voice Being Heard?

Many bloggers rely on traditional media to "begin the conversation". Bloggers write about what they have read, agreeing or disagreeing on the opinion being voiced. But bloggers are breaking news without the help or guidance of traditional channels. Think back over the last 2 years – it was a blogger who knew typography that questioned Dan Rather's now famous fake memo. It was the blogging community who brought national attention to Armstrong William's payment by the Department of Education to soft sell the *No Child Left Behind* program and it was bloggers who brought down Eason Jordan for the off-the-record comments he made in Switzerland. Bloggers began early on to force accountability and now a study conducted by the Poynter Institute states that "bloggers have been inspired by their success – they are demanding and sometimes getting a much bigger say in what's news."² This trend is driving customer voices and how you choose to dialog or not will determine the positive or negative impact of blogging on your business.

Blog Segmentation

One way of harnessing the power of blogs is to view blogs from the *Long Tail* perspective. The *Long Tail* concept was introduced by Chris Anderson in the 10/04 edition of *Wired*. If you haven't read the *Long Tail* article, I recommend Googling for Chris's article. In a nutshell, the *Long Tail* discusses the collective power of micro communities which gather because of their shared interest. Technology has made it practical to talk to one customer at a time; blogging allows us to talk to their collective interests, one community at a time.

For example, healthcare (an industry dominated by the female market) has numerous micro communities. A hospital or doctor provides services for young women who are not married, for pregnant women, for women going through cancer, cardiac or diabetes treatment...the list goes on and on. Each of these groups has a high need to talk not only with other women in the same situation, but the need to easily ask questions and sustain a dialog with their doctors, therapists and hospital specialty centers.

One of the best examples of corporate blog segmentation can be found at Stonyfield, the makers of organic yogurt. Stonyfield has developed individual blogs to speak to each of its key female market segments and its top business partner segment: *Baby Babble* for the YoBaby yogurt mom crowd, *Strong Women Daily News* for the women athlete, middles agers and Boomer markets, *Healthy Kids* for children from K-12 and their parents and the *Bovine Bugle*, designed for Stonyfield's most important business "partner" – the organic milk producing farmers that provide the milk for their yogurt production.

Transparency=Trust

Blogs are for building trust. Bloggers will be able to tell if you have a "hired gun" writing your blog or have "seeded" your blog with *Comments* from the inside. Remember, blogs began as personal diaries which allowed readers to get to know the person behind the words. Your blogging community will quickly see through inauthentic, exaggerated or dismissive responses. How you present yourself in this very visible arena will impact your brand, your company's reputation and your markets willingness to share their ideas with other bloggers and ultimately with you.

Before You Commit To Blogging

While the actual cost of running a blog is small, the time and talent commitment is not. Before you decide to jump on the blog bandwagon ask yourself the following questions.

- Are you willing to engage in an honest dialog with your customers? Accepting both the good and the bad comments?
- Do you have someone who can write? Don't underestimate this need. While someone may be a good presenter, or have THE position of expert, they may be a horrible writer. A Blog should not have a tone of a Business Plan or a White Paper, it is conversational and informal.
- Do you have time to post on a regular basis? Regular is not once a week.
- Do you have the time to review the comments of your blog readers?
- Do you have a strategy for becoming an advocate for your customers? Remember your blog visitors are coming to you to learn and be heard. They demand respect and visible proof that they are being heard.

If you answered no to the above questions, then maybe blogging is not for you or just maybe, blogging is exactly what you need to differentiate yourself from your competitors. One thing you can be sure of. The conversation will go on - with or without you.



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