



durbinmedia

WHITE PAPER:
CORPORATE PRIMER ON BUSINESS BLOGGING

What is a blog?

A blog is a shortened version of term weblog, commonly referred to as an online journal holds one or more of the following characteristics:

1. The site is published with easy to use software, making it possible for anyone with access to a computer to publish online.
2. Blogs publish the opinion of the author, but also hyperlink back to original sources, allowing readers to form their opinions of the credibility of the author as well as the veracity of the original source.
3. Many blogs possess comment tools that allow readers to instantly publish information, opinions, and feedback.
4. Many blogs are heavily networked, using a combination of outgoing and incoming hyperlinks that connect blogs discussing similar topics. This linking increases the search engine rank and distinguishes blogs from other kinds of online communities.

Blogging is experiencing explosive growth, starting with a few hundred in 2001 and reaching over 28 million in early 2006. Each day, 1.5 million new entries are added to the internet. Topics cover everything from casual social and political opinions to highly expert advice on business strategies and complex scientific discussions. For every topic there are hundreds if not thousands of individuals sharing both their professional and amateur opinions.

Who is Reading these blogs?

The majority of blogs are written by the young. The youth demographic, led by My Space has dominated the blogging numbers and thus much of the coverage. At the same time, the expert information found in blogs by professionals has given rise to class of people called "influentials." These top 10% of any demographic drive public opinion from local politics to international economic opinion.

As blog growth grows, so does the number of readers. The first blogs focused on politics and the media. They have altered the balance of power and changed the way that large institutions package their message. Bloggers were driving forces behind the resignation of Dan Rather from CBS News and the recent electoral defeat of the Canadian government.

The input of millions of people, led by the elite opinion of the influentials, has the ability to drive sales (as in the case of media and entertainment), ruin marketing campaigns (product launches with poor execution or sub-par products), and soon, begin to affect company stock prices and personal reputations of company executives. The bloggers are a creative and destructive force that are just beginning to touch the business world.

Why should a company start a blog?

Companies who read blogs get first notice of breaking news, emergent trends, and the changing nature of public opinion. Company blogs executed well build credibility and project a message of self-confidence. Examples of reasons to start a corporate blog would include; Employment Branding, Product Launch, Public Relations, Marketing Campaigns, Consulting Services, Vendor Relations, Media Relations, and Innovative Ideas used to established Industry Expertise.

Blogging evangelists often speak of a conversation taking place in marketplaces. Participating in the blogging world gives companies a competitive edge in that conversation. Bloggers are early adopters, expert networkers, and skilled at gathering competitive intelligence. Companies who start a blog can bring those skills in house and learn the language and etiquette of blogging, learning to engage these individuals in achieving goals. Companies that fail to engage in this conversation now will find themselves playing catch-up for years to come.

What can be expected from a successful blogging campaign?

1. Corporate blogs primarily are used for national branding. They allow companies to present accurate information without the filter of the media or advertising.
2. Marketing blogs can be used to amplify marketing messages through traditional channels. The use of a blog allows a company to provide a destination of information for consumers, from commercials to promotional coupons, to directions on how to use products.
3. Employment blogs allow a direct connection to online communities, increasing the number of qualified applicants by identifying communities of interest and building a loyal talent pool.
4. Public Relations blogs allow a corporation to put a human touch in place of the often used "corporate-speak." From pictures of employees to CEO blogs, to instructions on how to interview, public relations blogs remind readers that your company is staffed by real people.

What are the potential risks of starting a blog?

There are four main categories of risk:

1. There are significant negatives in your company's reputation and you aren't prepared to respond to them.

Some companies are targets for anti-company activists. If your company is in the spotlight, starting a blog about your company is not a good idea. Walmart, Halliburton, and anyone whose CEO is under indictment are bad candidates for blogs, because the issues surrounding the company are going to bring readers who are interested only in embarrassing the company.

That said, there are few companies that are in that position. And even in those cases, solutions exist to use blogs to pitch a message without significant feedback. You do not have to open comments. You do not have to answer every question posed. A company blog is still under your control.

To blunt or negate criticism, you need to pick topics that are related to your industry but not necessarily your company. The goal is not to tell the world how wonderful your company is. No one will believe you. Instead, your goal is to educate the public about some facet of your industry in order to build credibility in your field. Blogs are educational tools that can help brand you; they are not marketing tools that regurgitate a carefully crafted message vetted by your marketing department.

2. You don't have set guidelines in place that define what your blog is, and is not.

If a company starts a blog, they should have a clear purpose and a clear statement of what they intend. Honesty is the most important factor here. Set expectations and meet them. That doesn't mean that your blogger is responsible for answering every question. An employee blogger will know nothing about marketing, and shouldn't feel obligated to discuss any issue but those they want to write about.

The blog is your communication vehicle. If you're clear what you want to write, and it's relevant to your audience, you get a pass. If you start a blog about a subject and refuse to answer tough questions directly related to that subject, that's when you're accused of falsehood and deception.

This issue will come up - but if you are prepared, you can answer the question with a simple, "that's not my area," and move on. Having clear guidelines also protects the blogger. Firing a blogger for revealing company information is worse than never having a blog. Set clear guidelines that allow the blogger maximum freedom, and periodically review what can and cannot be discussed.

3. You're boring.

This is more important than it might first appear. A boring blog is a waste of time and money, and will bring a bigger backlash because it clearly is an attempt to tap into the power of blogging without adding to the conversation.

Outgoing links are important. No one likes a lecture, and outgoing links to new articles, studies, and other bloggers are good ways to avoid being boring. Most of all, treat the blog like you would your personal life. No one like the person at the party who talks only about their lives and their wants. If you're going to start a blog, make it about something besides yourself.

I might sit and listen to someone discuss golf for an hour, but listening to someone tell me their golf scores for an hour isn't worth my time. For companies, this is difficult because the natural impulse is to discuss the company. Your company should make up, at most 20% of the blog postings. Any more and you start sounding fake and full of yourself.

4. Comments left by readers leave the company liable to lawsuits.

One of the early concerns to corporate blogs was the threat of liability for reader comments. This danger can be entirely negated with comment moderation, which requires an approval before each comment is published.

If a company prefers a more open approach, they can host the blog informally - maybe providing sponsorship to a local blogger instead of directly writing the blog. They can also list a comments policy that specifically denies liability for comments made by public commenters. Your legal department should be involved, and a corporate policy in place, but if set guidelines are in place, most legal risk can be averted (nothing's perfect).

What examples are there of corporate blogs that have been successful?

Microsoft, GM, T-Mobile, Emerson, IBM, Pfizer, Boeing, Google, Sun...and that's off the top of my head. Wells Fargo just started a corporate blog. They're talking about San Francisco Earthquake. What does that have to do with banking, home loans, and insurance? Nothing, and everything. The blog is a public service that puts the Wells Fargo name in front of people who are curious about history (and happen to represent a great demographic to sell to). At the same time, Wells Fargo gets to talk about insurance risks without talking directly about themselves. That is a great blog.

The other companies on these lists use blogs to become thought leaders, improve Public Relations, discuss employment strategies, create communities of interest, and get focus group feedback on new products.

The real question is what happens when smaller companies are successful in using blogs to communicate a message. A small company with an active blog and high traffic can compete with multi-million dollar budgets of larger companies. Those are the blogs that should be studied for successful strategies.

Who should be responsible for creating and maintaining a blog?

There is one hard and fast rule on business blogging - it has to be done by someone who enjoys what they are doing. Having an executive write a blog may seem like a good idea, but if the executive isn't fully committed and passionate, the blog will fail. Understanding how to blog, and having the discipline

to post regularly is a learned skill. It takes six months to a year to fully understand blogging, and so the best option is to have someone who regularly blogs either writing for you, or at least training and advising your staff until you're up and running. This isn't rocket science, but online communities have their own etiquette, and being able to mesh firmly with your community requires some level of experience, and a willingness to make mistakes.

What are the costs associated with blogging?

You can set a blog up for \$0. You can host one for \$8-\$30 a month, and you can have them designed and optimized for a price range from \$500-\$5000. In-house staff may or may not be qualified, but depending on the importance of your branding, blogs can be customized to your corporate identity standards.

The real cost of blogging is time. Building audience can take time, and learning to blog takes several months with a few hours a day, not just writing, but reading, commenting, and researching the information you post.

What is the most important lesson in corporate blogging?

The most important lesson to take away from this white paper is that blogging is a tool for communication. There are a lot of companies pitching blogs as a silver bullet for all kinds of corporate problems, and that simply isn't true.

Blogs are a tool that can be used well and used poorly. They are still in the infant stage, especially in their uses for business. At the same time, the exponential growth in public blogging necessitates corporate involvement.

In the 90's, companies were told that anyone without a website would be out of business in a few years. That clearly was not true, but websites remain important tools for business. Blogging is the same way. Thousands of companies and millions of people are experimenting with online publishing. The lessons they learn will help establish the "correct" to approach corporate blogging. Starting now has its risks, but those risks can be effectively managed with the correct corporate blogging strategy.

About Durbin Media Group

Durbin Media Group is an interactive marketing firm based in St Louis, MO. They offer blog consulting services, online promotional campaigns and intelligence gathering for businesses interested in improving their online presence and message.

The company blog can be found at <http://www.durbinmedia.com/brandstorming>, where two bloggers share their experience in teaching companies and individuals how and why to blog. Their clients include Fortune 500 corporations, internet start-ups, and retail businesses using blogs to complement their traditional marketing strategies.

Jim Durbin, the Director of Corporate Communication, is the author of this white paper. He is available for speeches and presentations on individual, business, and employment blogging.