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Blog your way to more success

By Michael Cannon

Web logs, known simply as "blogs," have grown in popularity over the years to the extent of attracting continuing coverage by the mainstream media. The success of these online journals and their power to build communities has also grabbed the attention of corporate marketers as a potentially potent business tool.

Various estimates put the number of blogs worldwide in the tens of millions. Much of this "blogosphere" consists of personal journals, family message boards, or discussion groups on various issues and topics of the day. Increasingly, however, businesses of all types and sizes are turning to blogs as a way to stay in touch with customers and influence buying decisions.

A recent study by iUpload and Guidewire Group, "Blogging in the Enterprise," found that 90% of companies surveyed are either currently blogging or planning to blog, while over 50% have launched one or more blogs in the last year. Interestingly, 58% of the businesses that are currently blogging have less than 100 employees.

Benefits of blogging

A well done blog can build credibility and word-of-mouth excitement about your company and products that can potentially reach an audience around the world, something a more expensive advertising campaign would struggle to accomplish.

As another element of corporate communications, a corporate blog can also be used to build value in the following ways:

- Facilitate dialogue between company and clients
- Enhance the visibility of your company and executives
- Distribute useful information and advice

- Personalize the company by presenting a face and voice to the public
- Promote trust and transparency
- Build anticipation for new product releases
- Test new ideas before committing dollars to development
- Create relationships that result in future sales
- Convey an image of your company as being in tune with current trends

These benefits do not come easy... The keys to success include establishing relevance and credibility with your audience. Many business blogs feature a running commentary with news and creative ways to use their products. They may use the blog to address technical issues as well.

Some businesses encourage ongoing discussion, even eliciting customer comments to improve their products. In such cases, the blog acts as a focus group, but without the high cost. If someone posts a negative comment, however, it must be dealt with openly. This approach will enhance your reputation for being responsive, a quality that should not be underestimated.

On the other hand, to avoid losing control of their message, some businesses prefer to use their blogs as one-way journals or tightly moderate them to screen comments before posting.

Blog basics

Every business will have its own ideas of what a blog should look like and how much time employees should put into it. Nevertheless, here are a few tips to get your blog off to a good start.

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Keep it real – You are more likely to build trust by using a casual, helpful conversational style, as if talking with a close friend, rather than using the lifeless, factual style of a press release.

Be authoritative – Provide information that cannot be found anywhere else, like floating a trial balloon about a soon-to-be released product or discussing novel uses for products.

Stay relevant – Stick to what you know best, like your products, user experiences, creative applications, industry standards, and workarounds to problems. Include links to related blogs or websites.

Be consistent – Your branding strategy relies on a consistent message; likewise, your blog should speak with a consistent voice. Although employees make the best bloggers, you may have to set some basic ground rules to ensure they reinforce rather than inadvertently contradict the message.

Don't stop – Once you start a blog, keep it going. Otherwise, you risk angering those who have invested the time to participate regularly and those who have linked to your blog.

To enhance the blog's chances of success, the conversations are best handled by people who know your industry or business, customer facing people who

work the internal help desk or answer the toll-free support lines – even salespeople. These are the types of employees who can more readily relate to the real-world business challenges your customers face everyday and who understand the role trust plays in building and sustaining relationships.

Return on investment

Like any other marketing activity, a blog's performance can be measured in terms of ROI. One metric is the number of media placements according to quantity, brand and reach. You can assign a dollar equivalent for placements using the outlet's ad rates as a guide. You can also measure sales leads and how much web traffic comes from your blog. Improved search rankings can also be attributed to your blog, something for which you would normally have to pay.

These metrics will only show favorable results if your blog excels at getting useful information into people's hands. Treating a blog as just another sales tool dooms it to failure from the start. Remember, a blog's main purposes are to build relationships, trust and customer loyalty. Do these jobs well and word will spread. Sales come later. ♦

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