

Blogs – The New PR Tool for the Web 2.0 Generation

Weblogging has been one of the more visible phenomena of the Web 2.0 landscape – simply because among all the other elements of Web 2.0 (such as social networking or collaborative content creation), it has probably been in existence the longest. Blogs in their earliest form have existed since the early to mid-90s, even though at that point they were little more than personal websites manually updated on a regular basis. It was the launch of easy-to-use push-button publishing software such as Blogger.com, Livejournal and Movable Type that created the mass appeal and accessibility of blogging.

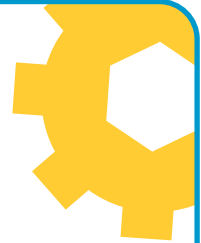


Blog marketing, as the term implies, refers to internet marketing via weblogs. A separate entity from the corporate website, the best blogs will feature regular posts, 'news-y' content, an option to subscribe to the blog via a syndication service, and a lively, active user community.

The concept of blog marketing has existed for a while, and many major consumer brands have since then created corporate blogs and used blog marketing with varying degrees of success. No longer just a 'cool' thing to do to show that a company is with the times, blogs are now being used to build identity and corporate credibility to attract and retain customers.

The rise of personal publishing on the Internet has firmly placed substantial power in consumers' hands. In the era of Web 2.0, the consumer truly is king. People are empowered to express their knowledge and opinions and, more importantly, broadcast them to a mass audience (or to anyone who will listen). The Internet's most established blogs, which discuss a variety of topics from technology to food to motherhood, have readerships in the hundreds of thousands and regularly attract reader comments in the hundreds. These myriad multiple online conversations can influence a brand's future and marketers have begun to sit up and take notice of the potential of blogging as a marketing tool.

How can you start using blogs for marketing?



This does not necessarily mean that you should immediately run out and start a blog for your company or product. There are plenty of other ways to leverage the reach and influence of blogs that don't involve any exhausting essay-writing on your part. Here are a few ideas:

▶ **Using blogs to understand your market and gain market intelligence**

Look at the blogosphere as a massive focus group of millions of people, all sharing candid, honest, unsolicited opinions and comments. These can be a valuable source of information about public perception of your brand, as well as about your competitor's products. You'll then be able to respond appropriately and quickly to such feedback where necessary.

There are now tools that will help you monitor blogs – a simple one is IntelliSeek's free website, BlogPulse, which allows you to enter keywords for search and comparison. Full-service tools, which come at a price, combine technology with some degree of human analysis to produce detailed reports on current trends and opinions.

▶ **Engaging the blog community**

Search out and actively read blogs that relate to your product or company, and engage bloggers on topics relevant to your brand. You can initiate dialogue with strategic comments on other bloggers' posts, which can be more effective than a PR pitch if it comes across as genuine.

▶ **Advertising on popular blogs**

Blog advertising can be a way to target a niche audience and speak to influencers. Blog readers influence each other's thinking, and popular blog writers are a significant influence on their readers. Communicating about your product via blogs can enable you to effectively reach critical market segments in a short time.

This goes beyond simply purchasing relevant, targeted ads on popular blogs. It's getting common today for companies to work directly with bloggers, to provide samples for review, or offer sponsorship in kind to run contests for blog readers.



Nokia did this with Singaporean blogger Mr Brown, providing him with their latest smartphone – he in turn went beyond writing a review of the product by actually using it on a day-to-day basis, blogging his experiences with it, and putting up photos of the phone in action. Similarly, Singaporean food blogger Chubby Hubby has tied up with kitchenware companies to offer free products to his readers, as well as with local bank OCBC to run features on its dining deals. Local telco Starhub pushed its new mobile internet service, Pfingo, through popular lifestyle bloggers as well.

There are dedicated blogs for nearly every esoteric product or niche interest you can think of. Search them out and, if they're regularly updated, and attract plenty of readers (check out the comments section for an idea), it's a good bet your product will get plenty of attention if you can work with the blogger to feature it.

► Build and put a human face on your brand

When you're ready to invest some effort and resources into it (blogging is hard work), a corporate blog can put a human face on your company. It acts as an additional channel for your customers to communicate with you, and, done properly, builds credibility for your brand. You can use the blog to engage current and potential customers with your thoughts on the industry and current trends, as well as as a platform to communicate news about new and future products and updates to existing products. Use your blog as you would any important PR channel and keep tabs on its popularity – not just through your website statistics but also through tracking subscriptions and monitoring the buzz on content aggregators such as digg, del.icio.us and technorati.

Many companies have already started using corporate blogging to good effect. Auto maker General Motors runs several blogs dedicated to specific target markets such as racing enthusiasts, truck aficionados, and Cadillac drivers. It uses each as a sounding board for new ideas and directions, announce new concept cars, and to build communities around their brands. Its FastLane blog posts regularly attract comments in the hundreds.

Computer giant Dell's 2007 foray into corporate blogging also seems to have been a success. In response to allegations of poor customer service, it created Direct2Dell and Dell IdeaStorm to talk directly to its customers. Direct2Dell was billed as 'A



blog about Dell products, services, and customers', while IdeaStorm's tagline was 'Where Your Ideas Reign' and was created as a site for customers to tell Dell what they really wanted to see in Dell products. Dell assigned a team of customer service representatives to each blog, ensuring that users who tried to communicate with Dell online would be responded to quickly. Both blogs have been well-received by critics as a forward-thinking step by Dell to connect with its customers and proactively resolve service issues.

Caveats and Pitfalls

The easy accessibility of information online means that the truth seems to reveal itself more quickly in today's connected world than before. It's imperative, then, to always be transparent and genuine when engaging in blog marketing. Wal-Mart found this out the hard way when BusinessWeek exposed their attempt at blog marketing as nothing more than a corporate scam.

Their campaign involved a blog called Wal-Marting Across America, made to look as if it was written by an average American couple as they chronicled their cross-country travels in an RV, parking in Wal-Mart parking lots. The blog featured photos of Wal-Mart and promotional commentary about Wal-Mart, such as describing employees going the extra mile, or promoting the chain as a place where consumers can "eat healthy while stretching their food dollar."

BusinessWeek profiled the blog, exposing the site as a promotional tactic by Wal-Mart's public relations firm, and news spread throughout the blogosphere, attracting criticism and ridicule. Wal-Mart struggled to address critics, but never quite succeeded, and the site was shut down shortly after.

This clearly showed Wal-Mart manipulating and skewing truth – which never sits well with consumers. The basic rule is to always be transparent – consumers today have an unprecedented level of access to information, and it's all too easy to be found out when you lie.

Conclusion

Weblogs are useful as an additional means of communicating with and engaging your customers, whether or not you choose to actually set up a blog. But tapping on its potential as a marketing tool requires lots of preparatory work and thought, and willingness to invest the resources needed to keep up to date, relevant, and, most of all, come across as human. Weblogs are a PR tool for the Web 2.0 generation and should be treated as such – never lie, hide information, or disparage your competitors – be assured that the truth will always reveal itself quite quickly!

If you'd like advice on setting up a blog for marketing purposes, get in touch – there's more to it than simply signing up for an account at Blogger or Livejournal! Till the next issue of Interact!, Happy Holidays!

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