



Blogs: Not Just a Trend, but a Resource

| The Next Generation Customer Acquisition Engine |

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Blogs: Not Just a Trend, but a Resource

The revolution of social networks and blogging in the Web 2.0 world is finally coming of age – or so it seems. Wave II of the IT Social Media Index, put together by ITtoolbox, finds that “user-generated/social media information sources like blogs, mash-ups, topic-based communities, and discussion groups have now become crucial to IT purchasing choices.” Decision-makers are placing greater trust in user-generated content – rather than listen to company marketing-speak – while making crucial purchasing decisions. All you SEO people can also rejoice: search has proven the most crucial early-stage activity before product purchase.

So what makes a blog a resource? Lorelle Van Fossen puts it quite simply in the Blog Herald – a blog is clearly a resource if “it is stuffed with non-personal, educational, and technical articles.” However, she does go on to ask quite a few pertinent questions about what actually defines a resource in today’s blogging world.

Coming down to it, how applicable are blogs in the enterprise? Do they really enable unfiltered communication, disseminating information from both ends of the corporate ladder?

Blogs and the Enterprise

While top management blogs are all very well, it is rare to find similar degrees of openness from the ‘trenches’, so to speak. The difficulties experienced by employees at the lower levels are filtered progressively in the move up towards the executive layers, until the message that reaches the top has but a tenuous connection to its origin. Can blogging change this?

The key here is candor: a degree of frankness that allows even the lowliest employee to byline a public post/comment that may be in disagreement with an executive. Without this openness, the anonymous comment becomes the norm, boosting moderation overheads and removing accountability. Eventually, a balance has to be found; this will happen only if you have the right blog strategy to facilitate bi-directional communication. And this, clearly, requires a thorough understanding of your business environment.

Corporate Blogging

With the launch of the Blog Council, there is now a professional community of leading global brands dedicated to promoting best practices in corporate blogging. Companies like Cisco Systems, Coca-Cola, Dell, General Motors, Microsoft, Nokia, SAP, and others are helping put together a private forum where executives can share strategy and tactics to develop a standards-based approach for corporate blogs.

“Major corporations use blogs differently while abiding by the same rules and etiquette,” says Blog Council CEO Andy Sernovitz. “Individual and small-business bloggers don’t face the same issues. For example, we still need to deliver a responsible and effective corporate message, but we need to do it in the complicated environment of the blogosphere. We have to speak for a corporation, but never sound ‘corporate.’ And we have to learn to do it live, and in real-time.”

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So Why Aren't More Big Corporations Blogging?

According to The Fortune 500 Business Blog Index, only 16 members, or 3% of Fortune 500 companies have blogs. Why? Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of Wired Magazine, feels that "perhaps the risks and uncertainties of public business blogging are so great that big companies only do it under duress, when other corporate messaging has lost traction." In Anderson's view, a successful enterprise can be understandably reluctant about introducing a new window on their business that may be independent of regular PR. A company that isn't doing so well, on the other hand, could be ready to try many things to regain customer share.

Despite the hesitancy, more and more top executives across the world are plunging themselves into the world of blogging. It is important to understand that blogging with proper rationale and introspection can help in bettering any organization's internal or external communication. Ultimately, this should benefit the enterprise.

Blogs and Content Management: Focus on the Customer

Why does an organization look for content management? Typical reasons include:

- Need for greater control of content
- Creating, managing, delivering, and managing content has become too time-consuming and laborious
- Managing online marketing campaigns
- High localization costs
- Quality of content is dropping
- Need to comply with diverse regulations

But does this really consider the actual users of the content? A good content management system (CMS) can help with process improvements, assure quality, and allow greater interaction, but gains over the long term are only possible with a focus on meeting customer needs. Relevant content must be available online, in print, over mobile networks, and more. A seamless, consistent, and professional experience must be available for customers from end to end of the process.

Blogs are powered by content management software tools that allow users without programming skills to update content regularly. However, the 11th edition of The Web CMS Report indicates that despite innovations in the marketplace, enterprise buyers and the Web CMS are still struggling to incorporate Web 2.0 features into Web publishing. CMS Watch principal Theresa Regli says, "Web CMS vendors and their customers are really feeling their way to Web 2.0. Adding wiki, blog, and commenting facilities to a Web CMS tool does not guarantee that they will actually be used."

With traditional CMS, implementation headaches are only the beginning: ongoing maintenance, support, upgrades, and most importantly buy-in from all key stakeholders are still thorny issues. A 'Web 2.0' makeover is, by itself, not enough to get an enterprise up and running in the participatory world of blogs, wikis, pod casts, etc. These technologies demand time, regular updates, sharp and consistent promotion, and strict administration. Non-technical users should be able to work on content and presentation without worrying about technology. With all this to consider, it's not surprising that large corporations are being cautious about this transition.

The arrival of hosted solutions, and the buzz of 'Software-as-a-Service' (SaaS) promises to ease this transformation. With no hardware/software purchase or installation, no maintenance and upgrade issues, and full support for all enterprise content needs including blogs, wikis, and more, hosted solutions appear to be the way to go. The bottom line here is that the choice of CMS must be driven by business requirements.

Conclusion

Blogs, as part of the Web 2.0 environment, provide a good medium for distribution of unfiltered communication. It helps, however, to remember these 'Blogger Truths' from the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, study: *Behind the Scenes in the Blogosphere: Advice from Established Bloggers*:

1. Blogs take time and commitment
2. Blogs must be part of a plan
3. A Blog is a conversation
4. Transparency, authenticity, and focus are good. Bland is bad.

The right CMS can go a long way in streamlining the blogging process, allowing businesses to honestly, candidly, and effectively communicate with all key stakeholders – and customers.

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