

A Word about Technology Marketing

To Blog or Not To Blog?

Exploring the Pros and Cons of Business-to-Business Blogging

Part 1 of 2

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Summary

To listen to the social media evangelists of the world, you'd think that the managers of a company without a blog might as well shut the doors, scrap the old manual typewriters, and move into the Luddite Manor retirement home.

By and large though, the blogging revolution hailed by social media writers and consultants comes mostly from consumer markets. Blogging in the business-to-business world is less common, carries a subtler set of issues and requires a different way of assessing value than "the buzz" or the number of page views.

We'll take a look at the reasons for and against blogging in the B2B technology sector along with some of the risks associated with a company blog and why the best medicine for blogging is a good plan. Some of what you find out may surprise you.

Introduction

In the introduction to their book, *Naked Conversations*, authors and ace bloggers Robert Scoble and Shel Israel declare:

We believe that blogging is not just wise for businesses wishing to be closer with their customers, but essential.¹

It turns out, though, that most of the popular blogs in the consumer markets are written by those living outside the corporate walls. Ezine-style formats such as Boing Boing, Gizmodo, Techcrunch and Engadget are among the highest ranked in all of the blogosphere and are written by independent bloggers largely about consumer electronics.

But blogging by the CE manufacturers themselves is spotty at best. Some industry notables such as Motorola have tried serving up their own, but an inconsistent pattern of posts has lowered the likelihood of maintaining a loyal reader base. Instead, individual tech enthusiasts volunteer to keep readers informed of the latest product and industry news by blogging on behalf of companies like Apple, Sanyo, Ericsson, and T-Mobile.

Business-to-business blogging provides an interesting contrast. Here it is the biggest IT manufacturers that have the strongest blogging programs. Companies like Sun Microsystems, Microsoft, IBM, HP, and Intel churn out blogs not only by senior managers, but from across the spectrum of employees, offering insight and provoking reader feedback on products, trends and ideas.

It is far from certain, however, that companies need blogs to become “closer with their customers.” According to a study from the University of Massachusetts, **eight percent of the Fortune 500 and less than 20 percent of Inc. 500 companies publish blogs.** Further, just 26 percent of Inc. 500 managers view social media as “very important” to their marketing strategy.² It is unlikely that these companies will go out of business simply because they do not blog.

What factors, then, should B2B marketers and PR managers consider before deciding whether to launch a blog? Are there business benefits to be gained? And how do you measure the business value of a blog?

Let’s start with a look at some differences between the consumer and B2B markets.

B2C and B2B – Worlds Apart

Chances are you take a slightly different approach when buying an MP3 player or flat-screen television versus, say, an enterprise financial software package or the next-generation electric motors for your medical device business.

Compared to consumer purchases, customer interaction with a business vendor is more complex and detailed, and so are the communication strategies that B2B vendors employ to convey information to their customers. First is the comparative number and importance of factors that go into a customer's decision to buy. Table 1 lists some of these.

Consumer Purchases	Business Purchases
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Features ▪ Price ▪ Professional ratings ▪ Consumer opinion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ External features ▪ Internal design ▪ Impact on business process ▪ Total cost over product life ▪ Strength of vendor relationship ▪ Vendor's technical vision ▪ Stakeholder consensus ▪ Input from influencers ▪ Availability of service and training ▪ Vendor's financial condition

Table 1: Consumer and business purchasing factors

Second, while consumer manufacturers sell into broader markets, most B2B vendors cater to particular industries or to specialized horizontal sectors such as IT. But despite having comparatively smaller audiences, vendors need to reach out to many fields of expertise and over a longer period of time. Inside a customer's walls, participants in a purchasing decision may include representatives from:

- C-level executives
- Legal
- Engineering
- Purchasing
- Information Technology
- User community
- Business process

Other influencers in the guise of consultants, analysts, journalists, and government leaders may also have an interest in what your company has say.

How does it all relate to blogging?

Most sales and marketing pieces take time to write, which limits them to more durable topics. **But blogging is different from other written communication – it is immediate.** It can be a forum for commenting on the latest breaking industry news or what some other blogger or journalist wrote this morning.

Blogging is also characterized by an informality and spontaneity that reflects its writer. A successful blog projects a voice and personality that connects with and feeds the emotional needs of its readership.

A B2B blog is a communication channel with the potential to reach key stakeholders and influencers with vastly different backgrounds and perspectives. Table 2 compares the elements of corporate B2C and B2B blogs along with some general reader traits.

	B2C	B2B
Who writes the blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outside bloggers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Corp bloggers ▪ Professional writers
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consumers ▪ Consumer media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Business customers ▪ Influencers ▪ Investors ▪ Community members ▪ Government leaders ▪ Industry media
Blog reach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ General audience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Industry specialists
Blogging objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Education ▪ Opinion ▪ Customer outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Thought leadership ▪ Relationship building ▪ Education ▪ Investor relations ▪ Customer outreach
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Breaking news ▪ Product reviews ▪ Opinion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Vision ▪ Commentary ▪ Technology ▪ Product reviews

Table 2: Comparison of B2C and B2B blog attributes

Armed with knowledge about business processes, legislation, trends and technology, a B2B audience looks for insight on issues and a perspective that reflects a company’s leadership. Technological vision, industry trends, business process, products, as well as legal and economic issues can all be fodder for a corporate B2B blog.

A 2005 survey by Backbone Media asked corporate bloggers why they blogged. The number one reason was, “**Another way to publish content and ideas.**”³ That is a pretty wide-open reason and suggests that one challenge of writing a successful corporate B2B blog is actually choosing from an overwhelming list of topic areas.

With a clear blogging goal wrapped with the dual layers of immediacy and informality, a blog can help lay claim to a company’s authority in the industry.

A blog does not stand alone

A blog’s flexibility does not mean it is a replacement for other types of collateral. Rather, a blog opens a new channel and, if written in a creative and interesting way, can bring readers to your website where they can access white papers, case studies and research papers.

Why is this important? Because your company’s website enables prospective customers and influencers to find you. A blog helps those audiences by offering new content on a frequent basis that can provoke further curiosity about your company.

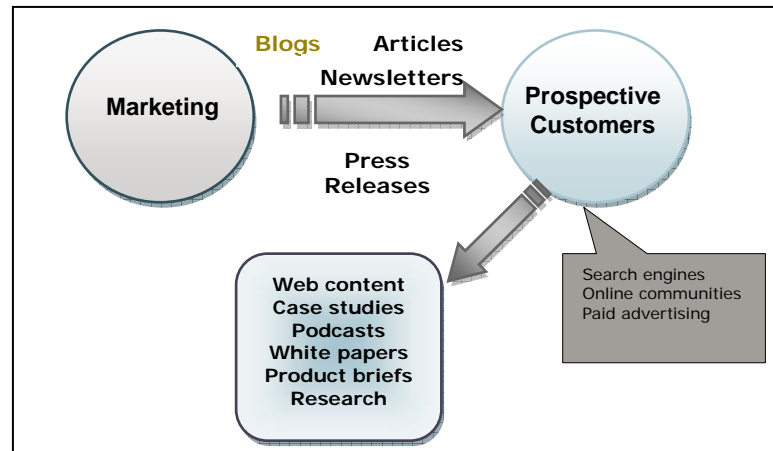


Figure 1: Blogs combined with other communications

A good post is often referred to by other bloggers or journalists. Blogs give readers an insight into the writer's way of thinking, and by extension how the company views the industry and related technology.

As part of a communications plan that includes speeches, webinars, published articles, newsletters and press releases, **a blog can provide a persistent voice that helps attract influencers and prospects long before they are ready to buy.**

On the other hand, writing a blog is a serious endeavor that takes commitment and requires many months to build a readership – assuming a latent readership even exists within a particular industry. And readership does not necessarily translate into business value. Nor is blogging necessary for industries where more traditional forms of communication suffice.

The remainder of this paper outlines the principal factors to consider when deciding whether or not to start a B2B technology company blog.

Part 2 of this paper describes a research and decision-making process and the elements contained in a blogging plan.

“IT decision-maker and influencer audiences spend more time consuming or participating in social media than they do consuming editorial media or vendor content.”

Reasons to Write a B2B Technology Blog

There are a number of possible goals for starting a company blog. The trick is to pick one or maybe two of them so you maintain a focus and expectation that will keep readers interested. If you want to address multiple goals, then consider having more than one blog so you can measure and adjust them individually. Here are some of the reasons you might choose to blog.

- **Thought leadership**

At the risk of contributing to the overuse of this buzz-phrase, a blog, particularly if written by senior managers, can establish a company's credibility as a technical and business innovator. When written with a

unique perspective, an interesting style and a dash of controversy, a blog can spark interest among readers who will then be drawn to your website for more information.

- **Strengthen customer and investor relations**

Notice that the goal is to **strengthen and not fix** your relations. If your relations need repairing, you may need to look elsewhere for a solution. But if the relationships are respectable to begin with, a blog can keep customers and investors abreast of what is happening in your company and explain how the latest industry news or trends will impact them. Use this type of blog to advise your audience and assure them you are looking out for their interests. If effective, the result might be that customers and investors are in it for the long haul because they view you as their advocate.

- **Get more media coverage**

The communications firm Brodeur surveyed U.S. journalists at the end of 2007 and found that, “**nearly 70 percent of all reporters check a blog list on a regular basis.**”⁴ While the survey included all manner of journalist, it does suggest that it is worthwhile to find out whether those in your industry use blogs as a source for story ideas, background or a means to get quotes and interviews.

- **Improve awareness and lead generation**

Search engines love new content. If you depend on online searches as a way to identify prospective customers and generate new business, then a blog can significantly improve your search ranking. If you have determined as a part of your Search Engine Optimization (SEO) what search terms prospective customers use, include those words and phrases in your posts. That will help even more.

- **Customer service**

While not a substitute for a well-oiled service and support process, you can use a blog to inform customers of upcoming product releases and known problems, or provide tips, tricks and best practices. This approach is particularly useful for software or similar products that offer flexible features. If you are successful at communicating to customers through other channels such as online forums, newsletters, bulletins, or email, starting a customer service blog may be redundant.

- **Attract new partners**

Sometimes it is difficult to establish partnerships with other companies, particularly if you are new to the industry and have not solidified a reputation. A blog can help to define the value you offer and how you see your technology as a part of a complete solution. Encourage potential

partners, by way of emails, phone calls and face-to-face meetings, to read your blog.

- **Increase brand value**

Establishing a company brand may or may not be tops on your to-do list. But there is probably one thing you want people to think of when they hear your company's name. A blog can help reinforce that message.

- **Explore social issues**

Blogs provide a forum for discussing subjects outside your mainstream business. Topics may be directly related to your industry such as public policy, industry legislation, and immigration. Or they may be indirectly related, such as environmental or health concerns associated with your industry. Further, you might address issues that are important to the company culture such as poverty, homelessness, or education.

- **Recruit new talent**

If you are looking to attract new employees, particularly members of Gen-Y, then consider including a blog as a component of an overall social media presence. A blog in conjunction with participation in social networking sites such as Facebook, or a college alumni network, can be used to address topics such as the company culture, day-to-day challenges in your company, and the social life in your town.

- **Other bloggers are writing about you**

If you discover others in your industry – competitors, journalists, or customers – are blogging, you may want to start your own. By having an established blog at the ready, you will be in a position to defend your company, products and decisions if a situation arises where you are criticized in another blog. Of course, the decision to ignore another blogger's accusation or to speak out is a difficult call, but having your own blog will give you the option.

A recent study of business technology purchases, by MarketingSherpa found that **80 percent of purchasing decision makers and 75 percent of influencers discovered the vendor instead of the other way around**

MarketingSherpa
Business Technology
Marketing Benchmark
Guide 2007-08

When You Should Not Blog

There are some very practical reasons why you should not choose to start a business blog.

- **You have no audience**

Certainly one reason you might not want to blog is that your customers couldn't care less about blogs and wouldn't read one if it were sitting there printed out on their desks every morning. They would rather read the trade rags or your product literature or have you speak to them face-to-face over ham and eggs about what's on your mind. And if your industry's journalists, consultants and analysts do not read or write blogs, there is no particular reason for you to write one either.

Keep in mind that just because these groups don't read blogs today doesn't mean they won't start in six months. It is a good idea to continually ask the question or maybe you might want to be your industry's' blogging pioneer.

- **Attempting to substitute for other efforts**

Despite opinions by some Web 2.0 evangelists to the contrary, blogging is not an alternative to market research, requirements analysis, white papers and case studies, or direct marketing campaigns. The level of detail contained in each of those is beyond what can be written in a blog post or even a series of posts. And by design, blogging is "pull" communication channel, not one that can be "pushed" to a mailing list. Instead, blogging provides an added dimension with an opportunity to share and perhaps invite alternative viewpoints on those research papers and case studies.

- **Because it's hard work**

Writing a blog can take several hours out of your week. To maintain immediacy, a blogger needs to read other blogs, keep abreast of industry news and main stream media, and then write posts that provide an interesting perspective. While you don't need to post five or ten times a day like some bloggers do, you ought to post every few days, at least once a week. It is a task that requires commitment over the long haul, so you may need to write when you are swamped at work, on vacation, on business travel and when you can't think of anything to write about.

- **You don't write well**

Alas, most of us do not have the bard's way with words. And, more than having writing ability, it is necessary to be something of a pundit to be a decent blogger. You need to comment on news and express new ideas, all the while relating your posts to your business with your point of view in an interesting voice. But if you can't find anyone in your company who writes well or has a knack for punditry it may be best to never have blogged at all.

- **You are satisfied with your business**

Perhaps your B2B technology company makes products or offers services that are not different from your competitors. For some technology businesses, differentiation lies in not so much in technical innovation, but in selling factors such as price and availability. If other forms of directed communications such as newsletters, flyers, brochures and email provide adequate value, there is little reason to blog. One exception of course is if you want to address the social issues discussed above.

- **You don't do the marketing thing**

A lot of technology companies out there do little in the way of outbound marketing. Some CEOs consider the job of their marketing staff to be primarily about product management, business development, and holding up the technical side of a sales meeting. A company that does not invest in an informative website, marketing and sales collateral and a PR effort most certainly should not invest in a blog.

What can go wrong?

Are there risks to blogging? Indeed there are. Just as there are risks associated with publishing web content, white papers, and data sheets, the key to deciding whether to blog is to know which risks are real, analyze them, and prepare in advance for the actions you will take in the event something does happen.

Charlene Li, Principal Analyst for Forrester Research and the firm's leading expert in social media and Web 2.0, recommends documenting all of the possible worst-case scenarios you can imagine and assigning a probability of occurrence to each one.⁵ Your blog plan should include guidelines for how to respond in the event that any of these problems do arise.

Things you might think are bad, but . . .

There are two concerns that are most often expressed by executives about the consequences of setting up a company blog.

We will lose control of the message. Some social media evangelists argue that corporations have already lost control of their message and even ownership of their brands.⁶ What they are referring to is the "conversation" enabled by forums and blogs that allow customers to comment on and critique blog postings. But listening to your customers is hardly the equivalent of losing control of the message. And you should think twice about relying on individual blog comments as representing the views of your customer base.

If you write a company blog, then you decide the topics, how those topics relate to your company and industry, and how you respond to the media and other bloggers.

Another concern over loss of control is whether to let all employees create individual blogs on a company-sponsored blog site. The decision is an individual one based on company personality and culture, but also requires more employee resources to manage and oversee the process. Companies such as Microsoft and IBM encourage employee blogging and manage it through training, reviews and an established policy. A reasonable approach is to create a pilot program that lets employees blog on the internal network first before deciding whether to go public.

They'll say nasty things about us. The dirty secret is that even blogs with high readerships don't receive many comments or trackbacks (links from other bloggers). Fewer than 10 percent of your readers will likely post a comment, and they mostly will just write something along the lines of, "Great idea." The probability of receiving negative comments is very low, but, as always, the watchword is "preparation." One action is to place a statement on your blog that says you will filter out any comments that are defamatory, contain bad language, do not address the topic at hand, or are purely self-serving advertisements.

All other criticisms, valid or not, are best dealt with by publically responding to them as quickly, as directly, and as courteously as possible.

Even without a blog, your customers, competitors and industry journalists may very well write critical things about you somewhere else. If other blogs exist within your industry, monitor them the same way you monitor news services and other publications for any mention of your name. Google offers a couple of free ways to do this: **Google BlogSearch** and **Goggle Alerts**.

Legal risks

Blogging does bring with it certain legal risks which, if not adequately prepared for, may result in an unexpected legal exposure. A 2006 article in *Network World* describes a number of these risks.⁷

The Electronic Frontier Foundation also provides a detailed legal guide for bloggers addressing a variety of areas including intellectual property, workplace blogging, and privacy. The guide can be found at www.eff.org/bloggers/lq

Legal Risks to Blogging

- Copyright infringement
- Disclosing the company's intellectual property
- Defamation of character
- False and misleading statements about competitors
- Inadequate handling of contact information obtained through blogging
- Not maintaining a complete blogging archive

All of blogging's risks can be mitigated by careful planning and either by creating new policies or modifying existing ones. A solid blog plan, written in conjunction with legal and PR advisors, will help to clarify blogging goals as well as prepare for the unintended bumps in the road.

The surest way to mitigate most risks is to limit the number of people who are authorized to blog on behalf of your company. If your goal calls for blogging by a larger employee population, then institute a required training session that covers the rules and the consequences for violating them.

The ROI at the End of the Tunnel

“What is the return on investment?” is a reasonable question often asked by managers to assess blogging’s value.

The Investment

On the expenditure side of the ledger, running a blog costs very little. A hosted business blog with high-end storage and bandwidth capacity is less than \$100 per month. Add to that \$2,000 or so for a web designer to give the blog some visual appeal and the total price is well within most discretionary budgets.

However as noted in a previous section, blogs require a considerable amount of time and commitment – **and time is money**. In particular, if just 10 of your technology employees each spend three or four hours per week preparing and writing a personal blog. That amounts to an “investment” of an additional full-time employee.

The Return

Like a company website, a blog is an ongoing entity, so measuring its value is a continuous effort. The most important step to measuring return is to first agree on the blog’s goal, then ensure that the measurements reflect that intent. In summary:

1. Define the metrics as part of your plan
2. Ensure the metrics reflect your goals and expected result
3. Establish a baseline set of data before starting to blog

Whether you should write blog and what form a blog should take are questions for which there are no simple answers. But by setting proper expectations with regard to timeframe and defining appropriate metrics, you can indeed measure the return against stated goals.

Conclusion

Blogging offers an immediacy and personal voice not found in other channels. But choosing a reason blog is just the first step. Determining if a potential readership exists for your blog and evaluating the attendant risks is crucial to deciding whether you should blog or not.

Blogging does not replace standard marketing deliverables or targeted programs. Instead it draws readers to them. So ensuring you have an informative website, an inventory of downloadable collateral, a lead-generation program and a decent PR firm at your side, are prerequisites.

About Case Mountain Communications

Case Mountain Communications helps companies identify and convey the strengths of their technology and vision through clear and concise writing.

We reach beyond the ordinary and create a point of view that speaks to the technical, business and market needs of each audience.

Visit us at www.casemountain.com



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