

A Word about Technology Marketing

To Blog or Not To Blog?

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

Part 2 of 2

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Summary

A blog brings to the table an immediacy and informality not found in other communication channels. But for B2B technology marketers, deciding whether to venture into the blogosphere is often a matter of knowing whether a viable audience exists and determining what business value the blog might produce.

If you have thoughts about starting a company blog, then applying a measured approach to the decision process will help determine the need for a blog, whether an audience exists, and whether blogging will create a positive effect on the business. If you decide to proceed with publishing a blog, then writing a plan can set the proper expectations throughout the company and establish how the blog will be launched, maintained and measured.

We pick up from Part 1 of this paper and walk through the elements of the decision-making process and the blog plan.

Introduction

The solo technology professional that chooses to publish a blog has it pretty easy – just sit down at the keyboard and start writing. For larger B2B companies though, the investment in time required to keep a blog going must often be weighed against other communication priorities and the long-term business value that a blog might bring to the company.

Part 1 of this paper addressed the reasons you might (and might not) want to start blogging, the associated risks, and a way of thinking about measuring success. We continue by describing an approach for making the decision to blog, including articulating the business goal, and outlining the elements of a blogging plan.

Making the Decision

Applying a solid business approach helps with evaluating the decision whether or not to write a blog. The following checklist provides a starting point:

- ✓ Decide who will lead the charge
- ✓ Clarify why you want a company blog
- ✓ Weigh the alternatives
- ✓ Analyze your web site and current stock of marketing collateral
- ✓ Identify your audience
- ✓ Do a gut check

■ Choose a leader

Regardless of company size, integrating any aspect of Web 2.0 into a marketing strategy requires sincere backing and commitment by the executive team. Without it, the lack of support will cause the program to fail before it starts. So, begin with a message from the chief to all employees that you are embarking on an effort to determine if and how Web 2.0 will fit into your communications plan and that support of all employees is critical for success.

Next, choose a leader who can implement the blogging program. This is not necessarily the person who will write the blog, but someone with the capability to define the overall goals and discover what makes readers tick. No matter whether this person works in marketing, customer service, finance or engineering, the essential requirement is the ability to sense where the value is and how to make adjustments as the program progresses.

- **Why you want a company blog**

Are you looking to increase your brand awareness, grow revenues or articulate your views on social issues? Write down a statement that defines the overarching goal for your blog and its benefits to your company and intended readership. Ensure you specify the short-term and long-term objectives and the reasons why you need to improve your relationships with the intended audiences.

- **Consider the alternatives**

Next, decide whether you need a forum in which to spontaneously comment on issues and invite responses. If not, are there other ways to build an audience: for example a monthly newsletter, increasing the frequency of your webinars, or widening the distribution channels for your white papers? If there are online communities within your industry, consider participating in them as a way to provide advice and perspective on your industry.

- **Evaluating Risks and Benefits**

At this point you want to analyze the risks of blogging, including the probabilities of negative comments and legal issues discussed in Part 1. Compare the risks of negative comments with those from other online forums as well as industry and main-stream journalists, and decide how you could manage such a situation if it arose. Compare the exposure to legal problems with those of other forms of communication your company employs, including product literature, press releases, white papers, speeches and user documentation.

- **Analyze your web site and collateral**

After taking pains to publish a blog, you do not want to discourage visitors with a less than satisfactory experience on your website. If you haven't done so recently, now is the time to take stock of how well your site is organized, how easy it is to use, and whether the content is accurate, complete and informative. You also want to ensure that you have an adequate inventory of collateral such as up-to-date white papers, case studies, and perhaps Flash demonstrations if appropriate.

If your website could use some sprucing up, then it may be worthwhile to refocus your energies here and postpone the blogging effort.

■ Audience research

The best way to determine if you have enough seeds to grow a readership is to ask. Put together a short list of questions to learn whether your intended audiences read blogs and if online resources, such as industry forums, are factors in making purchasing recommendations. Some of the groups you can survey are:

- Customers
- Industry journalists
- Analysts and consultants
- Suppliers
- Business partners
- Trade association officials

This would also be a good time to make sure you know who the other bloggers are in your industry and start establishing relationships with them. You can do this by commenting on their blogs, emailing them, or phoning them to introduce yourself and ask for advice and their perspectives on the industry.

■ Is this your final answer?

If it appears that you do have a potential audience and a solid foundation, then ask yourself once more whether you and or your staff have the time, resources and commitment for what could be years of blogging. If the answer is a resounding “yes,” then you are ready to move on to the planning phase.

If, after giving it some thought, you decide that your time is better spent improving other communication channels, is that the end of it? Not necessarily. If your competitors or others in your industry are blogging, you may still need to keep your eyes and ears trained on the blogosphere for any mention of your company, products or employees. It is also a good idea to maintain any relationships you have begun with other bloggers and continue to post comments.

Finally, owing to the rapid evolution of Web 2.0, you may be ready to restart the program in a year’s time. At that point you will be ahead of the game.

Create the Blog Plan

Writing a blog plan ensures that all participants, including company management, have the same understanding of the process and expected outcomes. A blog plan helps to organize the logistics and maintain

alignment with the intended goals. Here are some topics to include in a plan.

■ **Who will blog**

There are several choices you have about who will write your company's blog or blogs.

Single author blog. In this case your company's CEO or other executive is the sole writer. The blog becomes a personal diary from a single point of view.

Team blog. Taking a team approach to blogging reduces the time and commitment required by any one individual. Team members can share a single blog, with each blog reflecting an individual point of view. Alternatively, all of the members can contribute to a single blog, posting as time permits.

General employee blog. You may decide to allow all employees to create and author their own blog. If you have concerns about giving each employee public forum, you may consider a pilot program where employees first blog internally. Also begin to formulate a training program to ensure that all employees understand the guidelines before posting.

Professional blogger. If you see the benefit of a blog but lack the caliber of writer you need, consider hiring an outside blogger. You will lose an authoritative voice speaking on behalf of the company, but if you are creative and use the writer as a conduit for your CEO or other executives, it might pay off.

■ **Hosting the blog**

You have two possibilities to choose from when it comes to deciding where your blog will physically reside.

Externally hosted blog. Unless you have hundreds of employee bloggers, this is the best option. Several sites such as WordPress, Typepad, Blogger, and even your Internet Service Provider, host blogs and will support your chosen domain name. You can link to the site from your company's home page. Make sure that you clarify the level of spam prevention and archiving services that the hosting provider offers.

Internally hosted blog. If you already use content management systems such as Microsoft Office SharePoint Server and IBM Lotus Connections, consider the blogging services available in certain versions of those

products. Other companies such as **Moveable Type** and, **Textpattern** offer open source software for hosting blogs that are available for most server operating systems.

■ **The blog policy**

There is no standard or typical blogging policy. Rather it is one that reflects each company's culture. For the most part though, such policies are simple declarations. Microsoft's is a succinct list of nine bullet items – starting with “Above all, be smart” and ending with, “Think about reactions before you post.”¹

Even Harvard Law School's policy, while not entirely devoid of legal language, primarily addresses the fundamentals of conduct, content ownership, copyright (Creative Commons is the default) and privacy. This policy represents a most reasonable model for companies concerned about the legal risks of blogging.²

■ **What to do when things go wrong**

Business problems will crop up whether you have a blog or not. But owing to its power of immediacy, a blog offers one of the most effective ways to broadcast a response. Just don't wait for a crisis before starting the blog.

Here are some types of events that you might consider in your response plan.

Unfavorable press reports. At some point an article will appear in an industry or main-stream news outlet that is critical of your company, products, or managers. Most are not worthy of response, but for those that are, a blog provides a means of voicing your rebuttal in addition to writing a letter to the editor.

Delivering bad news. Whether your CFO is indicted for fraud or your quarterly sales drop by 20 percent, you need an outlet to explain the situation and articulate a plan for moving forward. Regard your blog as the voice of leadership to inform your audiences of what happened and why.

Blogging mishaps. When one of your employees posts a blog entry that is overly critical, exposes trade secrets, or infringes on a copyright, the initial impulse will be to pull the post. But by then it will be too late and

¹ Kevin O'Keefe, Blog posting, January 26,2005, “Microsoft's employee blogging policy.” <http://kevin.lexblog.com/2005/01/articles/cool-stuff/microsofts-employee-blogging-policy>

² Harvard Law School's policy can be found at: <http://blogs.law.harvard.edu/terms-of-use/>

your action will become the topic of other bloggers. Instead, plan for how you will address the issue with the employee and the posting of any follow-up blog entries.

Through careful preparation, you can use your blog to correct any inaccuracies reported in the media or acknowledge a problem along with an explanation of how you will correct it. Keeping readers informed about the progress of your corrective actions helps to maintain a strong relationship with them and provides background to other bloggers and journalists.

■ **Marketing your blog**

Building a reliable readership takes time – a few months if you are fortunate, but more likely a year or so. You can stimulate the process by announcing that the blog is there. Here are some examples:

- Send notices to all those on your postal and electronic mailing lists and follow up with an occasional email or post card as a reminder
- Highlight the blog on your home page, newsletters, and mailings
- Notify industry journalists, analysts and consultants
- Let other bloggers know about your blog

The best ally you have in acquiring readership is your content. If your posts are mechanical or you simply use the blog to repurpose your product literature, you will likely not engage an audience. But if you provide readers with new ideas or an interesting take on industry trends and news, then you give them something to think about along with a reason to return. Mix it up with a post about a new movie or the symphony's last performance.

Decide what the blog's "voice" will be: professional, funny, serious, professorial, snarky. The voice should be an extension of the writer's personality and one that complements the overall goal.

■ **Measuring the blog's value**

A well-read blog does not necessarily translate into positive business value. Measuring blog statistics such as number and duration of page visits, trackbacks (links to your blog) and how many readers left comments, are valuable indicators of how your readership changes over time. But a blog plan should also take into account measurements for tracking how effective the blog is at reaching the goals you set.

In most cases, the chosen metrics should be those you can test both before and after you start blogging. For example, if your goal is to increase your company's coverage in the industry journals, then it is a straightforward measurement to count the number of media references and describe the context in which they occurred.

Measuring abstract goals, such as thought leadership or improved customer relations, requires that you survey your intended audiences: Are they reading the blog? If not, why not? If yes, does it provide relevant and interesting content? This style of measurement will also help to estimate how much of your readership is made up of the audience you want to reach.

Conclusion

Taking a formal approach to decision process helps to clarify the purpose of a company blog, evaluate the risks, and outline the intended responses you expect from your readership. With this data in hand, it becomes easier to weigh the benefits of starting the blog against other forms of communication and sets the proper expectations with company management. A blog plan articulates the principal goal and topic areas for the blog, establishes the rules of the road, prepares for negative reactions, and describes how to measure the blog's contribution to the business.

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.

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