



The Business of Blogging

From small businesses to huge corporations, all sorts of companies are boosting their Web presence with blogs. Here's how to tap in to the best strategies for putting this casual tool to work in a professional setting. / By Ethan G. Salwen / Photography by Matthew Guillory

“**E**VERY BUSINESS THAT CARES ABOUT ITS online presence should have a blog,” says Steve Broback, a co-author with D.L. Byron of *Publish and Prosper: Blogging for Your Business*. “The No. 1 reason is that blogs offer the most economical and effective way to increase traffic to main Web sites.”

Broback insists that the benefits brought by search engine optimization should be enough to motivate hit-hungry personnel to start blogging. But he explains that blogs offer other, equally enticing business opportunities. For one, they provide a powerful new mechanism for marketing and branding. “People really like the casual, personal nature of blogs,” says Broback. “Content is utterly simple to update and easy to syndicate through blogs’ integrated RSS feeds.” Really Simple Syndication, or RSS, automatically updates subscribers’ bookmarks when there are new posts.

One of the most revolutionary, if often overlooked, advantages of blogs is that they are an uncomplicated way to enter the realm of social media. “Social media refers to the more dynamic, interactive aspect of the evolving Web,” says Broback. He notes that through a blog’s comment functionality, businesses can interact directly with clients in a public, worldwide forum.

Although blogs are today’s best tool for optimizing search engine results and the easiest way to get in on the action of social media, many executives continue to trivialize them. “There is still a great fear of blogging

in the business community,” says Broback, who owns the Parnassus Group, which provides social media consulting services. Broback says that executives’ unease comes from their misunderstanding of blogs.

Professionals unfamiliar with business blogging tend to equate all blogs with personal, diary-type endeavors filled with self-centered posts about the writer’s life. Nothing could be further from the truth. “Executives with strong visions of their business and marketing goals can leverage the advantages of blogs while avoiding the pitfalls,” says Jason Nunes, a user-experience designer who has built blog sites for small businesses.

Nunes explains that, ultimately, what distinguishes blogs from traditional Web sites is that blogs are simple to set up and maintain. “Using a blog, even a very small business can easily maintain a far more robust Web

Any company can establish a strong presence in the blogosphere, thus powerfully branding itself as open, honest, and transparent.

Just for Biz Bloggers

Publish and Prosper: Blogging for Your Business (New Riders, 2006) by D.L. Byron and Steve Broback is an **invaluable resource** for every type of business blogger. This deceptively thin volume is packed with information and inspiration, from general concepts to technical pointers. All info is linked to real-life examples and covered in a **nontechnical, motivational** manner. Broback hosts the **Blog Business Summit** blog, where executives will find timely advice, tips, and strategies for better business blogging (blog businesssummit.com).

presence than with a traditional site,” he says. “And blogging requires no programming skills.”

Big Payoffs for Small Businesses / “I started blogging in 2006 to create a community ▶

around the behind-the-scenes aspects of professional photography,” says Chase Jarvis, a commercial photographer with a staff of five. “I also wanted to use the blog to allow me to respond en masse to the large volume of e-mail I was receiving from peers and aspiring photographers.”

Currently reporting more than a half-million page views per month from 130 countries, Jarvis could not be more pleased with the unexpected results of his blog. “The blog was never intended as a marketing vehicle,” he says. “However, it has clearly helped me from a branding perspective. And I have been hired by more than one client who became familiar with my work via my blog.”

Large Companies Leverage Blogs

Blogs are just as valuable to large companies. One successful general-business blog is Boeing’s “Randy’s Journal,” named after Randy Tinseth, the company’s vice president of marketing. Through the blog—using skills no more complicated than sending e-mail messages—Tinseth and his team can quickly share content

with the world. “Randy’s Journal” is polished and professional but includes the casual, personal style of writing that is a cornerstone of successful blogs.

Adobe Systems has embraced a blogging strategy well-suited for companies of any size. It has invited employees to blog at will about non-sensitive company products, services, news, and developments. John Nack, the principal product manager for Adobe Photoshop, is the star of Adobe’s scores of blogs. He posts almost daily on his Adobe-hosted blog, “John Nack on Adobe.”

Nack posts mainly about late-breaking, inside-the-beast technical developments of vital interest to Photoshop users. However, in his whimsical writing style, he also reports on aspects of Adobe culture and relevant aspects of his personal life. This has earned Nack a stable following of thousands of readers and given him a prominent place in the blogosphere. All of this directly benefits Adobe by providing product support, company branding, and increased customer loyalty.

Suzanne Stefanac, the author of *Dispatches From Blogistan: A Travel Guide for the Modern Blogger*, offers these tips for blog writing: “Write compelling titles, get to the point quickly, tell the truth, keep posts short, and invite readers to respond.”

Although Adobe hosts a number of blogs, many companies have one main blog, handing over its reins to some or all employees. An example is Skype’s “Skype Blogs,” which includes postings from scores of diverse employees who write about the product and the company’s culture in the same fun tone that mirrors Skype’s branding. Even with limited resources, any company can establish a strong presence in the blogosphere,



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Business Blogging for All / The one-man blogging style of Jarvis and the different corporate approaches of Boeing, Adobe, and Skype merely hint at blogging's potential. Whether your company has shied away from blogging or is an active member of the blogosphere, the following key concepts and strategies can lead to big rewards.

Start a practice blog now; then delete it. If you're not already blogging, take a half-hour to set up a free blog at blogger.com or wordpress.com. Blog about personal or non-sensitive company information. This "playing" is invaluable. In literally minutes, you'll get a sense of the mechanics of blogging necessary for guiding your efforts.

Take a tour of the business blogosphere. The blogosphere has a distinct personality, with the successful business blogs sharing similar qualities. Check out the blogs of your competitors, as well as the more captivating blogs of smaller and larger businesses. Note the topics, the writing style, and the way the best bloggers create social media interconnectivity by responding to comments and linking to other blogs.

Appreciate that Google loves blogs. Broback says Google consistently places blogs (and connected static sites) high in search results. In essence, he says, Google has become every company's de facto homepage. He cites research that shows that most new visitors to a given company's site come through links from Google. Given this, it's important to understand a few basic techniques that greatly amplify blogs' search engine results.

Post three times a week. Broback says that posting at least three times a week will vastly increase search engine results for a blog. Therefore, it makes sense to commit to hitting the three-a-week mark. However, Nunes encourages small businesses and entrepreneurs not to worry if they can post only once or twice a week. "The quality of content should always trump the number of posts," advises Nunes, noting that over time—mainly through a dedicated readership—quality posts will draw the most desirable readers.

Link out to hook them back in. "As a rule of thumb," Nunes says, "bloggers should try to include three external links to relevant outside blogs or Web sites in every posting." Sending readers away from your blog might seem counter-intuitive, but Nunes explains that search engines pay a lot more attention to blogs with rich external links.

Just as critical, readers value blogs that direct them to interesting content. These readers will reward you with more visits. "If they really like your blog, they

will post links on their blogs that link back to yours," says Nunes. "These external links to your blog are the holy grail of increasing search results."

Benefit from the power of comments. "Many businesspeople are wary of using the comment functionality of blogs," says Broback. He says there's no need to fear, as comment functionality can be tightly controlled. Broback strongly advises enabling comments, as they are at the heart of the social media aspect of blogging. ►

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“Using comments is like having a free, worldwide focus group,” says Broback. Indeed, many companies are using blogs to involve customers in product research and development, resulting in better products and gaining customer loyalty at the same time.

To truly leverage the value of comments, Nunes believes it is critical to post negative ones. “This will make any businessperson nervous,” he concedes. “But it creates the perception of the willingness to listen, which is critical in marketing.” More important, Nunes says that companies can respond to criticism quickly and easily in a thoughtful follow-up posting, illustrating their responsiveness to the entire blogosphere.

Focus on content. “Effective blog writing requires smart thinking and a fluid sense of style,” says Suzanne Stefanac, the author of *Dispatches From Blogistan: A Travel Guide for the Modern Blogger*. “If posts aren’t tailored for the audience, readers quickly become bored and leave.” Stefanac says business bloggers must focus on interesting topics, quality writing, and putting themselves in the place of readers. In embracing the casual, personal style of the blogosphere, an executive might discuss an official announcement through a personal perspective—possibly providing an interesting tidbit not in the release.

Stefanac suggests that potential bloggers assess their writing skills honestly and seek help if needed. She also says that reading quality blogs and emulating one writer’s style is a great way to learn. Stefanac’s top tips for blog writing: “Write compelling titles, get to the point quickly, tell the truth, keep posts short, and invite readers to respond.”

Integrate Web sites and blogs. “Many people start blogs that quickly become more interesting than their static sites,” says Nunes. “So it’s a natural progression to integrate blogs into main sites or to replace the main site with a blog altogether.” Nunes explains that the most basic integration simply requires adding a “Blog” link to a main site. The next step is to host the blog on the same server, which cleans up the blog’s URL address and improves search results. Finally, a

programmer can integrate the design elements of the main site and the blog to create a seamless experience.

Nunes went a step further and killed off his traditional site, making his blog his only Web presence. “Readers want fresh content, and companies want an easy way to update sites,” he says. He explains that blogs are powerful, flexible, and inexpensive content-management systems. This is why a blog engine can become the ideal backbone to any Web presence—whether a blog-powered site looks like a blog or not.

Plan, jump in, and then clarify as you go. Part of the pleasure of personal blogging is learning how to do it over time, organically. Businesses are under more pressure to start out with a bang. Therefore, it’s important to outline goals, create a planning document, and write blogging guidelines before beginning.

At the same time, businesses shouldn’t overplan. The blogosphere is forgiving to newcomers, and entire blogs can be quickly revamped with a new focus. As Jarvis encourages, “If you think blogging might be of value to you or your business, jump right in. The barrier to entry is zero, and the rewards can be amazing.”

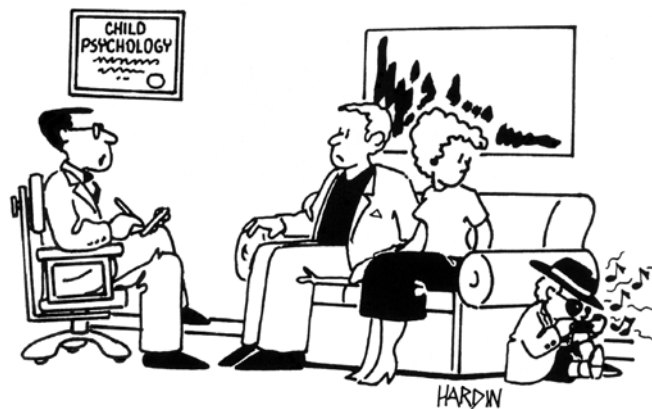
Keep an eye on success. Companies can monitor success in a tremendous number of ways, from free blog utilities that count visitors to expensive services offered by consultants. Before you start worrying about which monitoring methods best align with your business and blogging

goals, keep in mind that the very act of blogging will quickly reveal tools and approaches to judging success.

Employers should remember that most blogs are a form of public relations and that the exact effects they have on the bottom line will usually be hard to quantify. One basic way to assess your efforts is to regularly perform Web searches on your name or company, adding in the word “blog.” You’ll be able to get a sense of your place in the blogosphere. Another simple strategy is to carefully monitor traffic to your company’s main site in the weeks and months after launching your blog.

No time to blog? No worries. You can benefit from business blogging even if you don’t have the time or inclination to write the entries yourself. Like Adobe and Skype, you can invite some or all employees to provide content for your business’s blog. Another option is to use your communications department or an external firm to handle the job, possibly posting under your name and with your approval. Just as with traditional Web sites, it isn’t important who runs your blog. What is important is that your company has a healthy presence in the blogosphere. ■

Ethan G. Salwen is an independent writer and photographer based in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He has written a number of articles about blogging strategies for creative professionals.



“When did you first notice he had the blues?”