

The eStrategyOne Business Blogging Primer



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What Are Business Blogs? Blogs (short for web logs) are an online publishing platform characterized by frequent postings of personal observations. Unlike the typical corporate website, blogs have frequently updated content written by an identified author who expresses a personal point-of-view. You might consider a blog like a newspaper column from a well-known feature writer. Blogs are published in a diary format with entries chronicled by date. As the number of entries grows, bloggers store their postings in categorized archives. Blogs are characterized by sincerity, honesty, and a genuine human voice. Think of this genuine human voice as the antithesis of the language common to the corporate Press Release. Finally, unlike corporate websites, successful business blogs encourage customers and prospects to engage in a dialogue with the author. The blog publishing platform allows readers to easily post their comments. (Note: inappropriate comments can be removed.)

How Did Business Blogs Get Started? Blogs have their origin in online USENET newgroups and Bulletin Boards. These public but often underground communities of techno-savvy consumers engaged in spirited dialogs for years before the emergence of the now familiar blogging platform. The powerful voice of today's blogging community was originally recognized in April 1999 by the authors of the ClueTrain Manifesto (www.cluetrain.com)

"A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter—and getting smarter faster than most companies.... These markets are conversations. Their members communicate in language that is natural, open, honest, direct, funny and often shocking. Whether explaining or complaining, joking or serious, the human voice is unmistakably genuine. It can't be faked."

Revisiting *The ClueTrain Manifesto*

“Most corporations, on the other hand, only know how to talk in the soothing, humorless monotone of the mission statement, marketing brochure, and your-call-is-important-to-us busy signal. Same old tone, same old lies. No wonder networked markets have no respect for companies unable or unwilling to speak as they do.

But learning to speak in a human voice is not some trick, nor will corporations convince us they are human with lip service about “listening to customers.” They will only sound human when they empower real human beings to speak on their behalf.

Corporate firewalls have kept smart employees in and smart markets out. It’s going to cause real pain to tear those walls down. But the result will be a new kind of conversation. And it will be the most exciting conversation business has ever engaged in.”

From *The ClueTrain Manifesto*

Why Your Business Needs a Blog

Business blogs are a vital communication tool for a networked society. Blogs allow businesses to interact with customers and prospects in a sincere and credible manner. Further, and perhaps more importantly, blogs allow companies to listen to the unique public concerns of their marketplace.

Your business blog is the ideal medium to personalize your business and to engage your customers directly in fulfilling their needs.

Finally, whether or not you are listening, customers and prospects are already blogging about your business. Even now, they are sharing news, (whether accurate or not,) praise, criticism, or even just their confusion regarding your business practices. Now is the time for you to join this conversation.

Your Blog Publishing Strategy Let's say this business blogging imperative has you anxious, or at least curious. What should you do? Should you publish your own business blog? And if so, how do you get started?

- **Become a Blog Reader** Before you consider publishing your own business blog, make sure you experience the "state of the art" by reading other business blogs. The list is growing every day, but links to some of the better-known business blogs are included in the Appendix to this Primer. As you read other blogs, take note of their unique persona. Does the blogger use a human voice rather than corporate-speak? Do blog entries address both conventional and controversial issues unique to the industry? Are there comments from readers? Does the blog include links to other blogs and websites? Successful bloggers are confident of their readership, and therefore provide a wealth of outbound links of interest to customers and prospects.
- **Learn the Terminology** Blogs are merely HTML pages. What makes blogs unique is the way they are organized. Bloggers have also created their own unique vocabulary, so if you're unsure of the meaning of a *blogroll* or *moblogging*, visit the Appendix of this Primer. (By-the-way, you cannot order a blogroll at the local Sushi bar.)
- **Formulate an Objective** Successful business blogs have an objective, often stated as a subtitle to the name of the blog. In general, your objective should be to represent the human face behind your corporate identity. You want to use your business blog not as a lectern, but rather as a coffee table to meet constituents on their own terms. Use this opportunity to listen, learn, inform, and respond to your marketplace.

Some companies formulate more traditional objectives in terms of marketing

communications, public relations, competitive intelligence—even damage control. Keep in mind, however, that readers will immediately recognize traditional bureaucratic corporate-speak and abandon your blog.

- **Find Your Voice** Oftentimes, the objective for your business blog will not come from a committee, but rather, from a lone author. Successful blogs demand a unique and convincing editorial voice. As such, it is rarely a good idea for your Public Relations firm or Advertising Agency to author your blog. In many organizations, your best choice for the company blogger is an energetic volunteer.

Make sure you provide some basic guidelines for this eager blogger—see the Appendix for recommendations.

Public corporations are justifiably concerned whether or not company officers should be allowed to blog. (In many instances, officers fear rather than embrace the opportunity anyway.) Consult legal council if you have reservations.

Can a business blog have multiple authors? Certainly, and the General Motors Fast Lane Blog is a fine example. Think of the multi-author blog as the editorial page of the local newspaper.

- **Select a Publishing Platform** One reason for the explosion of blog publishing is the ease of use and affordability offered by blog authoring tools. Unlike most website authoring software, non-tech novices can launch a powerful blog within hours of simple online self-instruction.

There are two basic paths to consider for your blog publishing platform. First is the server-side application installed on a company computer. This choice will require an experienced application programmer to install and configure.

The second path is a blog hosted by a third-party Application Service Provider, ASP. In this instance, the blogger selects a template from the service provider and manages individual posts through a simple web interface.

In both instances, blog software automates posting, archiving, categorizing, and other tasks. See the Appendix for suppliers of both options.

Even if you are using a template, always employ an experienced graphic designer for the final product. Blogs lacking the deft eye of a designer are often visually too painful to enjoy.

Marketing Your Business Blog

Yes, if you build it, they will come. The moment you begin publishing, blog aggregators and search engines will discover and index your efforts. Like any marketing venture, however, you need a disciplined campaign to promote and build readership for your business blog.

- **Enable Syndication** Anyone with a web browser and Internet connection can locate and read your business blog. To achieve maximum utility from your postings, however, you need to “syndicate” or “broadcast” your “feed.” (Feed is your continuous string of regular postings.) RSS, or Really Simple Syndication is a publish / subscribe technology which allows readers to receive your postings automatically as soon as they are published. Your readers can also receive your postings via email. See *Equip Your Readers* for more details. See Syndication Help in the Appendix for more information about RSS.
- **Register with Blog Networks** Once your blog and syndication feed are up and running, register with the Blog networks suggested in the Appendix. This registration will increase blog visibility with both specialty aggregators and standard search engines.

- **Uncover Your Existing Audience** As mentioned in *Why Your Business Needs a Blog*, customers, advocates, critics, competitors, journalists, and other are already blogging about your business. A key step in marketing your blog, is a polite introduction to your pre-existing community. In some instances, a fan blog site or even a so-called company hate site may already have more traffic than your company website. Use search engines to locate your audience. Listen and learn first, and resist the temptation to control the conversation.
- **Join the Conversation** You can publicize your business blog by joining the conversation of other bloggers. When you find a posting of interest on another blog, respond with a meaningful comment. Most blogs allow you to provide your email address, and a link back to your own blog in your response.
- **Equip Your Readers** Despite considerable media buzz, not everyone is familiar with blogs. You can take the initiative to introduce your best customers to your blog directly through traditional marketing channels. When you announce your business blog, explain these options for visitors to read and participate.

Visit the Blog URL: Readers can always reach your blog via your published web address.

Syndicated Feeds: Explain to your customers and prospects how they can subscribe to receive your blog postings automatically. This can be accomplished via News Reader software or directly via the Firefox or Opera web browsers. (Microsoft is adding this functionality to their new release of Internet Explorer, and directly into their upcoming Longhorn operating system.) Acquiring and using News Reader Software is not difficult. Many business people who use syndicated news feeds consider it a

life-changing experience. Imagine scanning the headlines of all your favorite newspapers and magazines quickly and conveniently from a single screen. See the Appendix for details.

Email Distribution: Finally, weblog software offers the conventional option for readers to register to receive your posting via email.

- **Syndication versus Email** Blog syndication offers a unique advantage over traditional email. With traditional email, company messages might never reach the intended recipient due to SPAM blockers. This is even true for customers who give their permission to receive your emails. The email marketing industry estimates that 15 to 20% of legitimate permission-based emails are undelivered as a result of SPAM blockers.

Syndicated feeds, on the other hand, are not subject to SPAM blockers, and your postings always reach those who subscribe.

- **What Happens Next?** Traditional and new media pundits agree that business blogging is a growing market. You can expect to see an increasing number of businesses of all sizes entering the medium.

Here is what eStrategyOne predicts for business blogging:

- More blog networks will emerge to aggregate similar content for readers and advertisers.
- More traditional media properties, such as newspapers, magazines, television shows, movies, celebrities, individual products, and so on will add blogging to their marketing mix.
- While individual pundits will continue to blog successfully, branded corporate blogs will grow in significance.

Appendix Business Blog Resources

Business Blogs to Review Always Low Prices...Always (WalMart)
<http://alwayslowprices.blogspot.com/>

There are countless business blogs. Here is a rather random, but useful collection for your review.

Business Week Blogspotting
http://www.businessweek.com/the_thread/blogspotting/

Corporate Engagement
<http://trevorcook.typepad.com/weblog/>

Dan Gillmor Grassroots Journalism
<http://dangillmor.typepad.com/>

General Motors Fast Lane
<http://fastlane.gmblogs.com/>

Google Blog
<http://www.google.com/googleblog/>

Kong is King
<http://www.kongisking.net/index.shtml>

Micropersuasion
<http://steverubel.typepad.com/micropersuasion/>

Heather's Marketing and Finance at Microsoft
<http://blogs.msdn.com/heatherleigh/>

Sparkle Body Spray (Proctor and Gamble)
<http://www.sparklebodyspray.com/>

The Tinbashers Blog
<http://www.butlersheetmetal.com/tinbasherblog/>

Blog Terminology Blogware Terminology
<http://home.blogware.com/terminology.html>

Corporate Blogging Policy Corporate Blogging Policy
http://feedster.blogs.com/corporate/2005/03/corporate_blogg.htm
|

Blog Publishing Platforms Blogger (hosted)
<http://www.blogger.com/start>
Moveable Type (server based)
<http://www.sixapart.com/movabletype/>

TypePad (hosted)
<http://www.typepad.com/>

UserLand (server based and hosted)
<http://www.userland.com/weblogSolutions>

Word Press (server-based)
<http://www.wordpress.com/>

Syndication Help Feedburner
<http://www.feedburner.com/fb/a/home>

RSS News you choose (a must read!)
http://reviews.cnet.com/4520-10088_7-5143656-1.html?tag=ne.rss

News Reader Software Bloglines (web-based)
<http://www.bloglines.com/>
Feed Demon (software)
<http://www.feedException.com/>
Feed Reader (web-based)
<http://www.feedreader.com/>
News Gator (software)
<http://www.newsgator.com/home.aspx>
RocketInfo (web-based)
<http://reader.rocketinfo.com/desktop/>

Blog Networks Bloglines (web-based)
<http://www.bloglines.com/>

Blogwise
<http://www.blogwise.com/>

Daypop
<http://www.daypop.com/>

Popdex
<http://www.popdex.com/>

Technorati
<http://www.technorati.com/>

About eStrategyOne Online Marketing Solutions

eStrategyOne was founded in 1990 by Rich Ottum. The company conceives and executes online marketing solutions to increase website performance and profitability. Services include E-Business and E-commerce Strategy, Email Marketing, Business Weblogs, Online Advertising and Promotion, Online Customer Service Management, Website Analysis and Optimization.

About The eStrategyOne Buzz

The eStrategyOne Buzz, Online Marketing without Cream and Sugar, launched in August of 2003, well before today's media blogging frenzy. *The eStrategyOne Buzz* was nominated for the Marketing Sherpa Reader's Choice Award, and recently named the Business Weblog of the Web by About.com.

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