

FAISAL I FAROOQUI'S VIEWS ON PR & THE WEB - NEW STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNICATIONS -

Blogs started as a personal online diary or commentary on people's daily lives. The late 90's saw the evolution of blogs; people started keeping logs on their daily lives in an organised format and friends and acquaintances were invited to view these logs. These were termed - web logs. Over time, the 'w' and the 'e' were dropped and 'Blogs' came into being.

*Connections
between like
minded people...*

What began as personal online diaries, went on to become a space where people started sharing product opinions and seek peer recommendations on various issues and aspects. Although on the surface, blogging is about one individual putting their thoughts on the web for all to see, a fundamental aspect that has emerged is its facilitation of communication and connections between like-minded people. This transformation from personal diaries to product opinion to peer recommendation is what blogging is all about. An evolving medium, a blog could be on any thing: it could be on the most mundane stuff, could focus on interests, industries, travel, coin collections, luxury bags, etc.

Let us consider the reasons why we can not ignore the medium of blogs

Today, any one can create a blog in a matter of few minutes and the last seven years have seen more than 50 million blog postings. The medium has gained a steady momentum in the past three years.

*Bloggers are
powerful
"sneezers"...*

According to a study by Pew Research Centre (a very respectable source of Internet information in America) 12 per cent of the Internet users have made a blog posting and 27 per cent of them read blogs regularly. The study cites most bloggers as very powerful "sneezers". In his book *Ideavirus*, marketing guru Seth Godin defines a "sneezer" as the early adopter in a peer group - people who are likely to brave the unknown and adopt a new trend or fad first. Because sneezers are by nature respected by their peers, the trends they set are likely to be followed by the rest of the group. In effect, they sneeze the "ideavirus" to their peer group at lightning speed, through their blogs, and the trend becomes popular.

Most bloggers are passionate people whose sole incentive is to gain and maintain respect in the Internet community and they will do nothing to harm their on-line reputation.

Blogs are breaking the walls between the publisher and the public, as anybody can be a publisher in five minutes (the time taken to post a blog). This is in complete contrast to the age of mass media when editors and media-owners controlled everything that was published.

The latest bestseller book, *The World is Flat*, by Pulitzer winner Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*, gives a brief history of the

The world is flat...

21st century and predicts major drivers behind emerging business models in the 21st century. According to this book, one of the ten forces that have flattened the world is the ability to build and deploy one's own personal supply chain — a supply chain of information, knowledge, and entertainment. The most successful people will be those that are the most open to globalisation, new business tools and technologies and collaboration.

Peer endorsement translates into wisdom of the masses...

Set up in the year 2000, Mouthshut.com was among the pioneering companies in the user generated content space, which are now popularly known as blogs. Mouthshut.com was set up with the objective to capture the power of feedback and provide the public a platform to rant and rave about any product or service; to help end users gain tremendously from word of mouth recommendation. More than one million registered users express their brutally honest opinion on more than 75,000 items on Mouthshut. In fact, there are more than 600 reviews on Mouthshut about Mouthshut itself!

Unlike the past when they had limited choices, consumers today are spoiled for choice. Traditionally, in India, most purchases take place on peer recommendations. Mouthshut.com provides a trusted circle of like-minded people (based on their common interests for a product or service) and contributes to the wisdom of the masses.

Mouthshut started with an Indian focus and is a one-stop shop destination of all products available in India. Every third link in Google are of reviews of products on Mouthshut.com.

Consumer central for all things Indian...

With more than 300 categories of products and services reviewed on Mouthshut, there is no category expert and hence no review is edited, because if reviews were to be edited, Mouthshut will have to hire at least 300 editors and subject matter experts! The users themselves judge the authenticity of reviews.

In my opinion, there is a corporate disaster waiting to happen, given that more than 90 per cent of corporations do not have any corporate blogging strategy in place.

The new role for PR...

It is imperative that Public Relations shift from being mass media centric to being end-user (customer) centric. There is an urgent need for Blogging Consultants. PR agencies and communication professionals must reorient themselves to help corporations devise such blogging strategies and provide tools to reach out to customers directly. All such strategies must embrace bloggers rather than the 'Editor'.

PR agencies and corporate communicators can be the guiding force for corporations to navigate the maze of blogosphere.

The reality is that blogs and bloggers are here to stay; it is not a fad or a habit that has just come up, it will remain in some form or the other. Therefore one must have a strategy in place instead of reacting. One must acknowledge feedback and remember that bloggers present an opportunity to engage a global community of real people that is always communicating.

"The cultural influencers are changing...expert opinion in the media used to drive culture. Now, it's peer recommendations."

Brian Kalinowski
COO, Lycos

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Can you share with us how companies handle negative feedback posted on Mouthshut?

Faisal shared the example of bazee.com, which had aggressively advertised itself and as a result got very high traffic. Apart from the site crashing at regular intervals, products would not be available, systems would not work, and transactions could not take place. As a result, a lot of negative reviews were posted on Mouthshut. When Avneesh Bajaj, the co-founder of Bazee.com asked Mouthshut to remove the negative feedbacks, it was explained to him that it was not possible to remove reviews as they were opinions of customers and that it was a matter of establishing credibility and trust with the end users. Bazee.com sent a delegation of its communications team to Mouthshut to talk about the same and they were again advised that it would be better for them to address the issues raised by users. As a result, Avneesh Bajaj registered as a member of Mouthshut.com and wrote a very passionate review titled "From the founders of Bazee.com". He presented the facts and within 24 hours there were at least 5000 people who had read the posting and word spread that Bazee.com cares. Post which, Bazee.com corrected a lot of things basis the feedback on Mouthshut.

Citing an example of a poorly managed feedback issue, Faisal shared how IIPM (Indian Institute of Planning and Management), served a legal notice to Mouthshut to remove a few negative reviews. Mouthshut refused to do so and advised them that the reviews were honest feedback and could not be removed and the fact that Mouthshut was just the facilitator. IIPM continued to press on their case and harassed Mouthshut and some of its users for almost three months. This act of IIPM earned them a great amount of ill will amongst the bloggers.

Unlike newspapers that stand by their word, identities of bloggers are often unknown. Reputations are shred on the blogs and we are not aware of who

Faisal said that blogs would not become trivia because real people write them, give real opinions and provide real answers. The danger may lie in the fact that there are too many people out there doing it for fun.

He quoted the example of a blog called mediah.blogspot.com, which has even senior members of the media like Radhika Roy, Prannoy Roy, Vineet Jain and Rajdeep Sardesai hooked on. The blog gives real time information on each and every issue pertaining to media. Even

does them. Are information on hiring and firing is posted. This shows that nothing is
blogs in danger of private now and we need to recognise the power of people as
becoming trivia? ultimately that is what translates to the power of democracy.

(Excerpted from the presentation made by Faisal I Farooqui, CEO, Mouthshut.com, at PR Pundit's workshop, held in Bangalore on July 20, 2006)