
PR & THE WEB – BLOGS AS A NEW STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TOOL

***If you dismiss blogging as the blatherings of the Internet elite,
you will miss the most significant transformation in communications
since the arrival of the Web.***

- Chris Shipley, Business & technology authority

Changes in online technology have taken what was already a revolution in communication and now morphed the Internet into a real-time forum wherein for the first time, participants are as powerful as traditional controllers of media and public relations messages. Blogs are unmasking improprieties, ending careers, and damaging brands. Yet Blogs are also building and strengthening brands. Understanding Blogs and their unique culture and voice is imperative; trying to exploit this new format without that understanding will surely end in a vitriolic stoning of your brand. But choosing to ignore Blogs will leave you at the mercy of the stone throwers as well. While the advent of the Web spawned millions of new communicators and content providers around the world, the Web page format still followed the old broadcast model of one source beaming out to many. Granted, chat groups allowed for more of a conversation, but nothing compared to the noise being generated via Weblogs ("Blogs"). The creation of Blogs and Wikis has enabled a very different approach: the real-time open forum. Blogs may have started as online journals for computer geeks or angst-ridden teens, but now they have become a force to be reckoned with in the corporate and political spheres, many times acting as gatekeepers or even overturning the mainstream media world. And yet, understanding and harnessing these new technologies can serve as both an early warning system for what is being said about your company, and as a way for your company to lead the conversation in a manner that positions it as a trusted leader.

"Blogs" are arguably the fastest growing online phenomenon. The number of blogs on the worldwide web has been estimated at over 5 million and continues to grow exponentially. In 2004, 'blog' was named the word of the year by dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster as it released the year's top 10 words keyed in by users searching its websites. According to Merriam-Webster, 'blog' received the largest number of user requests by a wide margin.

So if you don't know about 'blogs' here's a quick introduction to blogs, blogging, and the implications of this new phenomenon for PR, marketing and corporate communications.

1. What is a blog?

"Blog" is short for "web log". It describes a sort of frequently updated, online journal that mixes personal opinion and daily life with observations and links to other sources and allows for readers to contribute their own thoughts and reactions.

The "blogosphere" refers to the universe of blogs, bloggers and blogging and is essentially an online community where information, opinions, and influence are spread by online word of mouth.

2. What do blogs contain?

Blogs are essentially online journals of thought and commentary. They may combine diary, rant, noticeboards, and photo galleries, and most blogs include archives of past entries, lists of other blogs favoured by the author, and a facility for reader

input. Blogs are characterised by a personal and conversational writing style, subjective points of view and a sense of egalitarianism and empowering the voice of the individual.

Although on the surface blogging is about one individual putting their thoughts on the web for all to see, another fundamental aspect of blogging is its facilitation of communication and connections between like-minded people.

3. Who is writing blogs?

All you need to start blogging (writing a blog) is a computer, an Internet connection and an opinion. Although originally blogs were written by individuals, there are now a growing number of blogs being set up by companies, organisations and the mainstream media. As such, bloggers (the people who write blogs) are a mix of amateur and professional writers.

As the Internet is now often the first stop for people looking for the 'real' story, successful bloggers (as measured by pageviews of their blogs) can become well-known commentators on a particular topic to the network of people interested in that area and can therefore become very influential. For example, it is not unusual for well-known bloggers to get quoted in mainstream media or be offered book deals. Blogs are both a catalyst and a barometer of public opinion.

4. Where are blogs found?

There are blogs in many different languages and on every imaginable topic e.g.: online diaries of the authors (e.g. <http://breakupbabe.blogspot.com>) specific topics (e.g. <http://www.livingroom.org.au/photolog/> - a digital photography blog) causes or agendas such as political or environmental blogs (e.g. <http://weblog.greenpeace.org>, www.instapundit.com, <http://www.greens.org.au/blog/ElectionBlog>) set up by the media (such as the "kazaagate" blog from Australian PC magazine which covers the Kaza court trial <http://www.apcmag.com>)

Among the most popular blogs are those that look at politics, such as "Instapundit," and those that chronicle life in a gossip column ("Wonkette") or catalog the latest in gadgets and technology ("Gizmodo" and "BoingBoing"). But **business blogs** have amassed large audiences as well. Perhaps the most influential are those written by Microsoft's Robert Scoble ("Scobleizer") and Jonathan Schwartz (President of Sun Microsystems). Scoble was formerly with NEC (Japanese information technology company) and a blogger who never held back in his criticism of Microsoft. In a gutsy move, Microsoft hired him and not only allowed him to continue blogging, it does not appear to censor him.

"Impressively, he has also succeeded where small armies of more conventional public-relations types have been failing abjectly for years: he has made Microsoft, with its history of monopolistic bullying, appear marginally but noticeably less evil to the outside world, and especially to the independent software developers that are his core audience. Bosses and PR people at other companies are taking note."

-The Economist

5. How much information on blogs gets into mainstream media?

A lot. These days Blogs provide a platform to introduce new voices into national or international debates on particular issues and to transmit content that doesn't get a run in commercial channels.

The blogging community adds depth, analysis, alternative perspectives, foreign views, and occasionally first-person accounts that can contravene reports in the mainstream press.

Issues that start online in blogs and resonate with audiences can eventually cross over and gain coverage in the mainstream media. For example Apple was forced to change the battery in its iPods after two consumers started a blog to expose the fact that the batteries only lasted 18 months and could not be replaced.

6. Are bloggers the new media?

Blogs enable companies to get direct feedback from their customers, providing information that could be used as a new source of market research. But it is critical to view blog content within the context of premium news sources. Blogs are best used in conjunction with comprehensive online monitoring of newspapers, magazines, newswires, Web sites and trade publications. As important as blogs are, as a reputation analysis tool, they are additive to traditional media sources, not a replacement.

They represent a fundamental shift in power as compared to other media because blogs enable individuals to play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, sorting, analysing, and disseminating news and information - a task once reserved exclusively for the media.

Blogs have been known to publish news before the traditional media reports on it and media are increasingly scanning blogs for tips, sources, story ideas, and perspectives on current issues.

However, the concept of bloggers as the new media raises some interesting questions. On one hand, bloggers are like editorial writers or columnists since they apply the filter of opinion. On the other hand however, bloggers may not have any formally-learned writing skills, are not bound by a journalistic code of conduct, are not subject to an editing process, and may be pushing a personal agenda.

7. What are the implications of blogging on PR and marketing communications?

Blogging is an emerging new channel of information and influence that all communications professionals need to be aware of and develop an understanding for.

It is essential that communications professionals are aware of the blogs relevant to their organisations so that they can monitor what is being said about their organisation and its products and services (which can provide early warnings of impending issues or potential crises), competitor information (through competitor blogs), as well as gaining better understanding of the concerns, challenges and interests of different stakeholder groups.

How Powerful Have Blogs Become?

On September 12, 2004 someone posted on a blog that a disposable Bic pen could open the supposedly impenetrable Kryptonite bicycle locks. Word spread via blogs. Kryptonite issued a statement that its locks still deterred theft. The New York Times published the story the next day. Then, according to blog monitoring company Technorati, nearly 2 million people visited blogs to read more about it. In the end, Kryptonite paid \$10 million in replacement locks—that's out of \$25 million in total revenues.

Communications professionals should also note the media outlets and journalists on their target lists who have their own blogs. These can be monitored for the journalist's personal areas of interest, and new stories that the journalist may be thinking of or working on. Journalists' blogs can be a helpful source of background information when pitching article ideas.

Another implication of blogs on PR and marketing communications is the potential to be utilised as a tool by the organisation to communicate with stakeholder groups.

As such, blogs can be used as part of an integrated communication strategy to enhance and complement the rest of an organisation's communications activities.

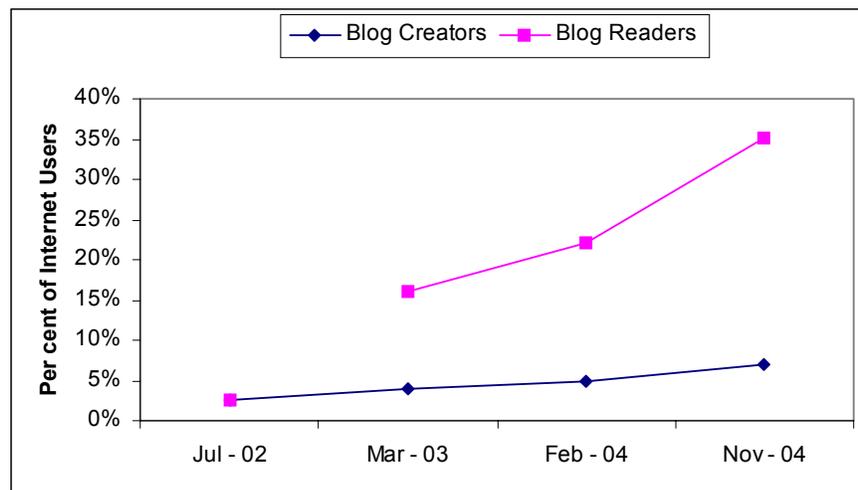
...Be aware that Blogs are shifting power to the consumer...Marketers need to be aware that control of communication is fast moving from them to the consumer. Marketers can still buy media in the form of advertising, and gain editorial coverage via PR, but they must expect to see a rapid expansion of blogs, which will increasingly shift the balance of power to the consumer. Blogs give every disgruntled consumer and nutter alike the power to personally publish their dislikes of companies and products and for this to spread like a bushfire through the online community. Marketers need to adopt new techniques to monitor and respond to this phenomenon...

Blogs provides a bottom-up, grassroots method of sharing information about organisations through the web. They can be used to:

- Generate interest about the company and/or its products and services among current and potential customers, partners, resellers, media, and industry influencers
- Build buzz and positive word of mouth promotion for the company and/or its products and services
- Spark informal conversations about the organisation and/or its products and services
- Position executives or R&D teams as thought leaders
- Offer an outlet for news and information not important enough, or even suitable for a press release, but still worthy of being communicated
- Differentiate an organisation from its competition
- Provide an alternative to one-to-many email broadcasts

- Enhance internal communication
- Target very specific groups - people with specific demographics, opinions, perspectives, worldviews, and interests
- Reach audiences that may be difficult to reach through conventional communication channels - e.g. tech-savvy audiences
- Monitor public opinion and sentiment

What is research telling us about Blogging?



According to Technorati, 23,000 blogs are created every day—that's one every 3 seconds—and the number is accelerating. While the vast majority are diary-type blogs only of interest to a few family members or friends, some have gained large audiences. According to the findings in the Pew Internet & American Life Project (November 2004):

- 27 per cent of all Internet users in the US now read blogs
- that equals 32 million Blog readers
- that's a 58 per cent jump in just 9 months
- 7 per cent or 8 million have created their own Blog
- 12 per cent or 14 million have posted comments on a Blog
- and that is while still 62 per cent do not even know what a Blog is

Clearly the tipping point has been reached and the numbers of Blog readers and creators will continue accelerating. And just who are these people? The Pew study reports that in the US they are:

- 57 per cent male
- 48 per cent are younger than 30
- 42 per cent live in households earning more than \$50,000
- 39 per cent have college or graduate degrees

So they are a well-educated and affluent community. Yet Pew reports in this 2004 survey, "there has been greater-than-average growth in blog readership among women, minorities, those between the ages of 30 and 49."

Market research firm ComScoreMedia Metrix recently examined visitor growth rates among the 50 top web sites. Top ranked sites growing the most included

www.blogger.com a personal publishing site owned by Google and www.myspace.com where youth share musical tastes.

In addition, PQ Media recently found that marketing spend on blogs, podcasts and RSS (really simple syndicates) feeds is forecast to grow at a compound annual rate of 106.1 giving further weight to the rise and rise of blogging.

However, the use of Blogging as a communications tool by Public Relations is still very low. A study by US based PR News/MediaLink of 459 PR practitioners, in April this year, found that:

- Only 18 per cent have created and managed a blog for their company or client
- 21 per cent have communicated news via a blog.
- Those that did blog themselves did so mainly for consumer and business news followed by new product announcements, and health news.

IMPORTANCE OF BLOGS FOR MARKETERS AND COMMUNICATORS

Blogs represent one of the biggest challenges and opportunities for those responsible for marketing or communications within companies. Whilst blogs are not yet on the radar to a great extent here in India, they soon will be. So, what should marketers and communicators be noting about recent blogging trends?

1. Not all blogs and bloggers are equal.

Marketers and communicators need to appreciate there is a hierarchy among blogs and bloggers.

These range from the influential 'commentators' to individuals who indulge their passion or obsession.

However, each has their own importance and place in the communication channel. And, as with any marketing or communications campaign, each has to be addressed separately.

2. Blogging follows the classic marketing life cycle.

At this point most bloggers would be classified as 'early adopters'.

They are comfortable with technology and normally better educated than most. They also tend to be articulate and (not surprisingly) opinionated.

As such they are important as advocates, opinion formers and influencers, making them difficult for marketers and communicators to ignore.

3. Blogs are often seen as more credible sources of information.

A recent Reuter's story on blogs quotes a blogger who says that blogs "restore power to individuals with something to say".

Bloggers publish individual opinions with none of the constraints and need for balance that one expects from traditional media - in fact the raison d'être for many bloggers is that they are neither fair nor balanced.

Public values have changed over the past decade or more. There is more distrust of traditional media which are often perceived as peddling their own agenda - often without being 'upfront' about it.

Ironically users of blogs actually trust blogs and bloggers more because mostly they don't hide their bias and the site visitor feels that it is up to them to make the choice as to accept what is said or not.

Given consumer skepticism with traditional communication - especially advertising - any channel that offers credibility has to be viewed as the way of the future.

4. The media see blogs as a threat - so they are embracing them!

For the reasons above, media are scared that a sceptical and distrustful public will begin to desert them. So they are getting into the blogging business.

Traditional media want to control the relationship with their audiences. They figure that if, as many US media are now doing, they also include access to blogs on their website, they will gain credibility. One newspaper executive is quoted as saying "anything that serves the reader with more information is good for us".

They are also allowing (and encouraging) some of their own senior journalists and commentators to create blogs - thus deliberately blurring the line between traditional and non-traditional media. This also offers the opportunity to make their senior 'talent' seem more attractive and contemporary to those attracted to blogs.

For PR, this further extends the challenge of relating with media, which may increasingly write for two audiences - traditional readers, and blog advocates.

Here are two examples of how marketing companies are using blogs or working with bloggers, thus showing how blogs are gaining legitimacy as an emerging and credible communications channel.

General Motors, the US car maker, is reported to have used PR techniques in establishing relationship with bloggers when it got into a dispute with the LA Times over what GM considered was unfair editorial content. As a result, GM actually pulled its advertising from the LA Times. Obviously facing what it considered a block in getting a fair hearing in traditional media, GM felt that blogs were an important secondary media to use.

Subaru, the Japanese car maker, is recognising bloggers as a key audience worthy of dialogue by offering bloggers the opportunity to win a trip to France to cover the Tour de France as well as other prizes. A condition of entry is that because the trips require bicycle riding along with the Tour de France participants the winner of the competition will have to be 'in exceptional physical condition'. See www.racetothetour.com

Seeing how influential blogs are becoming, it can be tempting to try to co-opt them as part of a public relations effort. However, given the somewhat skeptical, anti-establishment tone of blogs, attempts to make them part of the plan can backfire. Here are a couple of examples.

Mazda's Crash

First, Mazda created a blog called HalloweenM3 via a 23-year-old code-named "Kid Halloween" who listed his movie interests as all car chase movies. He linked to what he said were cool videos a friend of his recorded off local public access cable TV (which carries no ads).

The videos were of Mazda cars break dancing, imitating skate boarders, and driving on Halloween night. Bloggers unmasked Kid Halloween as part of a corporate PR effort when they noticed the production values and the same videos posted on the Website of the agency that produced them. The response was an angry Blogosphere and thousands of pick-ups and links to the story. Mazda pulled the site.

Dr. Pepper's Raging Cow Turns Blogosphere Sour

Cadbury's Dr. Pepper division created a new milk beverage called Raging Cow with hip, youth-oriented, edgy flavours such as "chocolate insanity" and an angry cow icon. Dr. Pepper hired Richards Interactive to give hip legitimacy to the product by reaching out to blogs and create an obviously mock blog written by the cow. It invited a group of young bloggers to be briefed on the product, whom it encouraged to blog about the product. It fell afoul of the blogosphere when it asked those young bloggers not to mention that they had been briefed about the product, as if their sudden new enthusiasm for flavoured milk was purely their own idea. To the company's credit, Raging Cow's blog and blog-PR initiative was one of the first efforts by a mainstream company to use blogs for marketing purposes (March 2003). But its PR mistep was badly received by the blogosphere, to say the least. Hardcore bloggers, went ballistic at this attempt to corrupt their integrity of blogs, and for weeks, even months, it seemed all you heard on certain blogs was vitriol against Dr. Pepper, there was even a call for a boycott of the product with a boycott viral graphic that spread through blogs.

Bloggers see the blogosphere as strictly a bottom-up grass roots world and react badly to any top-down marketing efforts. The company confused the tool (weblog) with the people who run these (bloggers). The better PR approach would have been to have targetted the bloggers of the most appropriate blogs for their target audience.

BUSINESS BLOG EXAMPLES

While the earliest blogs may have been either tech or politics, they have taken root in many industries from autos to airplanes, from yogurt to appliances. Here's a look at several examples.

When Bob Lutz, the vice chairman of product development at **General Motors**, wants to get quick feedback from consumers on the company's latest product launch, new strategy, or something as specific as the quality of the sheet-metal fits on the latest Chevrolet, he knows where to go: his corporate blog, FastLane. "I would suggest making a series of light sport utility trucks and vehicles," an auto enthusiast urges on FastLane; and, the world's largest car maker is listening. Through 'blog watching', and reacting to comments by committed bloggers, GM is gleaning valuable feedback from customers for product development.

To illustrate the power of blogs, do look at **Autoblog.com**. While it is in a crowded field that includes stalwart print brands such as Motor Trend, Popular Mechanics and Auto Week (authoritative American automobile magazines) with their own Web sites,

Autoblog has nearly pulled even with the big players in terms of web site traffic rankings.

Boeing marketing chief Randy Baseler is connecting with media and customers via his blog at www.boeing.com/randy. Boeing's use of the blog for interactive conversation with its customers is useful as there are lots of comments from customers, engineers, and other airplane fanatics. It's a wonderful example of something we are going to see a lot more of in the future - use of all kinds of collaborative technologies (blogging is only one) to bring companies, customers, and suppliers into meaningful conversation with each other - to everyone's benefit.

Stonyfield Farms catapulted itself from a little town organic dairy products company to a global player through five blogs including one written by a farmer (The Bovine Bugle). But perhaps its greatest insight was that its organic products were the choice of independent-minded, educated women. So one of its more popular blogs is "Strong Women" featuring articles and information perhaps not directly related to yogurt but right on target for the yogurt buyers.

Blog sites of interest

- <http://www.nakedconversations.com>
- <http://www.sethgodin.com/sg/blog.html>
- <http://guerrillaconsulting.typepad.com>

Blog Attributes

- *Personal, candid, informal,*
- *Transparent*
- *Frequently updated*
- *Journal entries in reverse order (most current on top)*
- *Includes links to third parties*
- *Includes reader comments*
- *Includes "Trackback" function showing who is linking to it*
- *Includes "Blogroll" of links to other Bloggers*
- *Offers RSS feed*
- *Includes archive of past entries*

Sample Blogger Code Of Ethics (from Forrester's Charlene Li):

- *I will tell the truth.*
- *I will write deliberately and with accuracy.*
- *I will acknowledge and correct mistakes promptly.*
- *I will preserve the original post, using notations to show where I have made changes so as to*
- *maintain the integrity of my publishing.*
- *I will never delete a post.*
- *I will not delete comments unless they are spam or off-topic.*
- *I will reply to emails and comments when appropriate, and do so promptly.*
- *I will strive for high quality with every post – including basic spellchecking.*
- *I will stay on topic.*
- *I will disagree with other opinions respectfully.*
- *I will link to online references and original source materials directly.*
- *I will disclose conflicts of interest.*
- *I will keep private issues and topics private, since discussing private issues would jeopardise my personal and work relationships*

CORPORATE POLICIES AND BLOGGING

Deciding whether or not to allow employees to blog is worth some careful thinking. There have been many cases of embarrassment or even firing bloggers. Here is a set of guidelines offered by Gartner's blogger Charlene Li:

- Make it clear that the views expressed in the blog are yours alone and do not necessarily represent the views of your employer.
- Respect the company's confidentiality and proprietary information.
- Ask your manager if you have any questions about what is appropriate to include in your blog.
- Be respectful to the company, employees, customers, partners, and competitors.
- Understand when the company asks that topics not be discussed for confidentiality or legal compliance reasons.
- Ensure that your blogging activity does not interfere with your work commitments.

The goal is to try to allow for the candour required of bloggers while not compromising the company. It is particularly important that company bloggers understand they may need to comply with such sensitive matters as IPO quiet periods.

TIPS FOR COMPANIES TO APPROACH THE BLOGOSPHERE

- Start reading business blogs to get a sense of tone, voice and content. Familiarise yourself with blog search engines and monitors. Check out the blogrolls and trackbacks.
- Plan with your communications counsel to decide whether you are looking for a blog to: raise company profile through positioning you as a thought leader; create buzz to raise company and brand awareness; be a sales tool talking to prospects and existing customers; communicate internally for project collaboration; use as an internal knowledge management tool.
- Be comfortable in your own skin. Do not try to be funny or wisecracking if that's not you, since blogs are about being candid and ringing true. It is better to be informal and personal, but remain true to your own voice. Update frequently, even if briefly, and do not use a ghost blogger. Use loads of links to relevant information; remember — as a blogger you are the tour guide.
- Write a company blogging policy.
- Choose a publishing platform. Using a community, commercial and Web-based service such as LiveJournal or Xanga or MSN Spaces, is not appropriate for a corporate blog. Its better to use either a hosted professional service such as Typepad or even better, if your IT department is up to it, use software on your own server such as Moveable Type or Word Press or Radio Userland.

- Make sure your trusted communications counsellor holds a briefing session with your team so everyone understands the key points, the goals, the ground rules and the risks.
- Make sure the blog is promoted via search engines and other blogs. Mutual links, or blogrolls, are the way to network in the blogosphere.
- While influencing key bloggers may be a sound strategy, approach this with extreme caution and transparency. The blog world punishes top-down tactics or undisclosed co-opting of bloggers.

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's workshop, held in Bangalore on July 20, 2006)