

DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES FOR THE BLOGOSPHERE

A perspective on integrating blogging into a strategic public relations program



Much has been made recently of the explosion of blogging. Named "word of the year" in 2004 by Merriam-Webster, blogs are increasingly becoming an integral part of the digital lifestyle. Today, hundreds of thousands of these web-based "diaries" are being used for everything from product reviews and positive corporate buzz, to uncovering scandals and reporting breaking news, to spreading rumors and old-fashioned ranting.

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All the excitement surrounding the influence and skyrocketing future of the blogosphere, however, is rivaled by concern on the part of corporations, PR and marketing professionals. Lawsuits involving company secrets posted on blogs, company-damaging allegations and rumors spreading via RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds, and damaging product-bashing have been well-documented, both by the traditional media and other Weblogs. In fact, many are asking how they can combat blogs and what they can do to head off the disastrous consequences of negative blog coverage.

But corporations, PR and marketing professionals need to be asking themselves other questions as well. With blogs' instantaneous turnaround, viral dissemination and global scope, these three groups should be thinking about how they can use blogs to their advantage. There are so many positive aspects of blogs and blogging, and building positive interactions with the blogging community can help corporations immeasurably

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Blogging can lead to positive things

Indeed, bloggers' candid style means that they are able to connect with readers and consumers on a more personal, emotional level. It is their transparency that makes them seem so credible to readers. This is an extremely powerful tool for corporations to have in an increasingly distrustful society.

But one group consumers do trust – and trust strongly – is their friends and those whom they feel have a personal stake in their lives. Thus, bloggers' ability to connect with readers in a visceral way, to speak to their concerns and their needs, to demonstrate that their best interests are truly at heart, and to empathize with them

by actually being one of them, creates credibility and trust that more traditional avenues may be lacking..

Interactions with blogs and bloggers can be categorized in three areas:

- Responding to blogs – having your say after the fact
- Blog outreach – actively pursuing blogs
- Becoming your own blogger – getting in on the action

Responding to blogs: having your say after the fact

Bloggers will often write about an industry, company or product about which they feel strongly. When a blogger says something, it's very possible that many people will be listening – and due to the viral nature of the internet, what they say spreads quickly. Needless to say, this can have very good, and also very bad, implications for a company and its reputation..



So what happens when a blog posts something about a company, product, or executive? What can be done to stem the spread of a negative posting – or facilitate the exposure of a positive one? And what is the



best course of action if a blogger says something negative – and it's true?

Blogs: an early warning system

Keeping an eye on the blogosphere can help alert companies to upcoming coverage in the more mainstream media. Like the early days of the Internet, blogs will publish information or stories first, hours or sometimes days before the mainstream media hear about them. In fact, many mainstream journalists are turning to blogs for news sources and story ideas, and are thus likely to take cues from bloggers when making decisions about their coverage

With this in mind, corporations can use bloggers to their advantage, by turning them into the proverbial canary in the coal mine. When an unflattering story – true or not – is posted on a Weblog, corporations can use this as a warning and begin planning their strategy for dealing with mainstream media. Corporations, marketers and PR personnel can also gauge what consumer response will be by reading the comments posted by the blog's readers

Through RSS feeds and trackback technology, corporations can also follow the blog post to see if other websites and blogs are linking to it, and whether or not it is spreading and gaining momentum. In this way, corporations can predict with some accuracy how big of a splash the story will make in the mainstream news outlets.

A relevant example of this involves the bike lock company, Kryptonite. Famous for its impenetrable and tough locks, the company was assailed in September 2003 when a poster on a blog demonstrated that the lock could be opened with a Bic pen. The news traveled to major blogs such as Endgadget, which denounced the lock and advised readers to switch to something else, and eventually hundreds of thousands of internet users read posts about the Kryptonite lock's fallibility.

The news spread through the blogosphere for five days before the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and other mainstream media picked it up. However, Kryptonite

largely ignored the blogosphere during that five day window, issuing only a statement saying that their locks were completely theft-deterrent. By the time the news hit the mainstream media, Kryptonite had a major PR problem on its hands. The problem cost the company \$10 million, nearly half of Kryptonite's \$25 million yearly revenues. An earlier response might have averted this disaster.

Blogging and the mainstream media: a circular relationship

Blogs do not only serve as early warnings for the mainstream media; increasingly, the mainstream media is serving as an early warning system for the spread of stories and rumors in the blogosphere as well. An example of this is the recent controversy surrounding Best Buy's treatment of a customer who was arrested for making a purchase with a stack of \$2 bills. The customer was shackled in front of a store full of customers and humiliated by store personnel, which accused him of paying with fake bills because cashiers did not believe that the \$2 bills were real and legal tender..



The *Baltimore Sun* and other newspapers first ran the story, which was then picked up by AnAndTech, a news analysis and technology blog. The story spread throughout the internet, ultimately landing on Gizmodo, an extremely popular blog

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which receives over 100,000 page views each day and 4 million visitors each month. Many of these readers note that they depend on Gizmodo for news and reviews to recommend where and what to buy. This story is a notable one; the fact that blogs are also taking their cues from newspapers and magazines, and capable of growing a story beyond the mainstream media, demonstrates that blogs are increasingly *becoming* mainstream, and are more influential than ever before.

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Blog outreach – actively pursuing bloggers

Building a positive relationship with bloggers can also help corporations not only when the going gets tough, but also to spread buzz about new products or services, new partnerships or executive appointments. Bloggers' reputation for honesty and speaking from their personal experience – traits which make them more credible and trusted to consumers – can serve corporations and PR personnel well.

As such, reaching out to bloggers, either through sending them news and information about new products or industry happenings, posting comments on their sites or engaging them through other relationship-building methods, can help get the word out and increase publicity in an authentic-feeling way

As mentioned previously, consumers get to know bloggers in an intimate, friend-like way, and thus trust them more – meaning that recommendations, enthusiastic product reviews, and positive write-ups take on a high level of resonance, in much the same way that recommendations from friends and family have greater weight for consumers.

Signs point to the fact that some companies are already taking note of this fact – and taking action. For example, Marqui, a telecommunications company, recently began experimenting with paying bloggers \$800 per week if they mentioned their product. While the results are not yet known, blog advertising is certainly going

to become a lot more prevalent in the years ahead.

Let bloggers know someone in the company is listening. Some bloggers might go so far as to invite the corporation to sponsor their blog, which also can offer a high return on investment as well as add cachet to the company by making it appear “in the know” about consumer trends. It can also add a layer of perceived transparency for consumers, making them feel as if they can trust the company and its products more strongly – after all, a blogger wouldn't bother to write a positive review if he or she hadn't had a positive personal experience.

That being said, corporations and PR consultants alike should keep in mind that consumers are very savvy. Today's consumers know instantly when they are being marketed to, and when blogging has crossed the line into traditional advertising; Mazda and MSN's attempts at seeding advertisements masquerading as blogs to sell a product, and the subsequent backlash they created, serve as cautionary tales. One blog reader even went so far as to say, “everything about that blog is disgusting,” referring to Mazda's “fake” blog, which was pulled from the internet less than a week after going live.

On the other hand, many companies are using blogs to their advantage – simply by being honest. Shayne McQuade, a former McKinsey consultant turned entrepreneur, used bloggers as an easy—and free—marketing tool. In 2002, he invented a special backpack that allowed serious hikers to keep their electronics charged while on a hike. He had little money left to market his product after developing and manufacturing it – so he outsourced the job to bloggers.

McQuade asked a friend who ran a blog frequented by potential customers to mention the product. Within a few hours of the blog's posting, other blogs linked to it, eventually getting the product noticed by blogging bigwigs Engadget and Gizmodo. Nearly overnight, McQuade was deluged with orders

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Gizmodo. Nearly overnight, McQuade was deluged with orders. The lesson to be learned here is to stay authentic. Apple's extremely loyal fan base created buzz for the company by blogging about everything from the iPod to the latest Mac incarnations, even going so far as to post running speculations about future products. Ipodlounge.com even allows readers to post photos of themselves with their iPods – and has received thousands of photographs from every continent, including Antarctica.

Such blog sites, while initially amusing and entertaining, are linked to by hundreds of other blogs, and eventually picked up by the mainstream media, leading to invaluable – and free – positive coverage. By encouraging fans and "tech geeks" to lead the way, Apple's blog exposure has remained authentic and credible. Despite Apple's recent legal attacks on bloggers publishing company secrets, positive bloggers have remained loyal to the company, proving that a positive and authentic approach is invaluable and strong.

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Becoming your own blogger – getting in on the action

The most interactive way to get involved in the blog medium is to become a blogger oneself. This can range from everything from a CEO blog to a product team site, employee sites and more. Before launching a corporate, executive, team or employee blog, however, it is extremely important to first understand who the company is trying to reach, who will run the blog and what people in the organization are willing to be the most transparent. In a corporate blog, transparency is key – and just as expected as in a personal blog.

Dozens of companies including Stonyfield Farms, Yahoo!, Maytag, and even Nike have launched weblogs, each with different goals. Stonyfield Farms, for instance, has created a more "traditional" blog, allowing new mothers to talk about its baby yogurt and comment on new products and ideas.

Maytag's blog, on the other hand, is used more as an advertisement. Called "SkyBox," the Weblog is used to promote a refrigerator aimed at male sports fans. Unlike Mazda and MSN, whose blogs purported to be independent, unaffiliated blogs, Maytag has made it very clear that SkyBox is a corporate-owned blog. Indeed, the blog's full name, listed at the top of the page in a large print, is SkyBox by Maytag Weblog, and links on the site take visitors to Weblogs and advertisements for other Maytag products. By staying totally transparent, and fully embracing the fact that the blog was created for and meant solely to promote Maytag's products, Maytag has retained its credibility – and possibly even managed to gain trust among consumers.

Nike's Weblog is another interesting case study. The blog was published by Gawker Media, an extremely popular gossip and media blogging group, to promote Nike's Art of Speed project -- a collection of films and artwork from young directors and artists. In fact, the site



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actually carried a Gawker web address – www.gawker.com/artofspeed – and touts on its main page that it is a “teamup between Nike and Gawker Media.” This site, like Maytag’s SkyBox, did nothing to hide the fact that it was meant to increase awareness of the Nike project. Through its partnership with Gawker, Nike’s site had the added bonus of demonstrating to young, savvy, affluent consumers – Nike’s target audience – that it is completely in the know about what is cool, what their consumers like, and what they’re reading.

The site was only active for 20 days, creating an extra urgency for consumers to visit the site and link to it as often as possible before it was gone for good. In this way, Nike managed to create still more buzz for its blog. Additionally, though the site was meant as an advertisement for Nike and its products, it focused almost entirely on Nike’s commitment to giving young artists and filmmakers their big break, thus positioning Nike as a socially-aware and socially-committed company – and adding to its credibility.

In other cases- such as with the Association of National Advertiser's blogs - the sites are written by corporate executives in an effort to advance industry issues. Others, such as GM's FastLane blog, are building word of mouth among auto enthusiasts. Intuit's blog showcases real-world customers using their products. Although each of these blogs is serving distinctly different audiences, they all share some things in common. They are authentic. They are written by real individuals who have a passion for their causes. They solicited feedback from readers. And they are conversational,

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engaging readers and even other bloggers in a dialogue.

Other well-known and popular sites, such as Microsoft’s Scobleizer, have also garnered attention and consumer praise for their transparency, honesty and trustworthiness. Consumers are increasingly turning to these sites, and these bloggers they feel they know so well, for information and advice – and are becoming loyal customers in the process. The positive effects of effective blogging are all around, and may even outweigh the negative effects.

Conclusion

As blogs – and blogging – continue to grow in popularity and influence, there are many steps that corporations and PR consultants can take to ensure that this latest means of communication is used to their advantage. From serving as an early warning system to allow time for damage control in the mainstream media, to seeding new product mentions and corporate news in positive blogging posts, to creating one’s own blog as an innovative way to get the word out, blogs afford plenty of opportunities to communicate with myriad audiences. Indeed, the interactive and constantly-changing nature of blogs means that information can be instantly spread throughout the blogosphere, making word-of-mouth more powerful than ever before. The positive opportunities created by blogging are many, and they are continuing to evolve and grow at lightning speed.



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The Euro RSCG Magnet Insights team ensures that the counsel and programming provided to our clients is knowledge-driven, rather than assumption-driven. Our approach to effective public relations infuses research, from the planning stage to implementation to measurement processes. In this way, the Insights team provides effective counsel and integrates research into all facets of the public relations process.

The Insights team has recently introduced a strategic planning model, Brand MAGnification, to bring consistency and quality assurance to our program development, from assessing a client's reputation to identifying messages, strategies and tactics to building custom measurement programs.

The Insights team is well-versed in all applications of research, including product marketing, corporate image/positioning, employee communications, crises, public policy/public affairs, and investor relations. This seasoned team has utilized qualitative and quantitative, primary and secondary, research methods in nearly every industry, primarily in support of communications. The majority of our work is done in-house by experienced researchers and analysts. We complement these efforts with strong partnerships and best-in-class research vendors for large scale and global research projects. In addition, the Insights team has demonstrated considerable success for our clients using Research for Ink - generating newsworthy research surveys and polls to establish credibility and generate media interest.

Beyond our client-specific research, planning and measurement programs, the Insights team collaborates annually with Professor Steven S. Ross of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism to produce the nation's largest survey of media. Since 1996, these studies have informed the public relations programs at Fortune 500 companies and been incorporated into the curriculum at the top journalism and communications schools around the country. Our most recent report, "The Credibility Crisis," examines the impact of newsroom scandals, corporate misbehavior and economic wariness on the way journalists think and work.

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Euro RSCG Magnet, part of Euro RSCG PR Worldwide, specializes in consumer and buzz marketing, multicultural communications, business-to-business public relations, corporate communications, investor relations, financial communications, and public affairs. Headquartered in New York City, Euro RSCG Magnet has additional offices in Washington D.C., Chicago, San Francisco, Pittsburgh and Southern California. Clients include Absolut, Evian, IBM, Mercedes-Benz USA, Heineken USA, Yahoo!, Cantor Fitzgerald, D&B, Thomson Corporation, Stryker Corporation, International Paper, Towers Perrin, JVC, U.S. Center for Disease Control, U.S. Department of Treasury, Heinz, Bayer and Transitions Optical. www.eurorscg-magnet.com.

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