

# Blog Update: Leveraging the Web of Credibility in your PR and Marketing Efforts

If you're like most public relations or communications professionals, you've already been thinking about blogs. Perhaps you've even launched a blog for yourself, your organization, or a client.

Once you've gotten past the basics of defining a goal and subject area for your blog, setting up the blog management software to publish it, and begun writing, you face a new set of challenges. How do you build regular readership for your blog? How do you get influencers in your market space to pay attention to it? And how do you leverage the blog to create PR opportunities – coverage in news stories, attention from industry leaders, and the like?

In this white paper we'll talk about how the unique nature of the *blogosphere* creates opportunities for you to meet your communications goals – and how it differs from some of the media with which you are more familiar. In particular, we'll talk about how the unique way that blogs lend credibility to one another can help you take advantage of this new medium in your communications programs.

## **Blogs: The Web of Credibility**

At first glance, blogs may simply look like a new format for the same kind of content that you're used to producing: news updates, opinion pieces, and so on. But it's important to understand how the unique features of blogs create some new dynamics that you can utilize as a business communicator:

According to blog-tracking site Technorati™ (<http://www.technorati.com>), there were 20.1 million blogs being published in October of 2005. These range from personal journals with fewer than a dozen readers to sites created by experts and celebrities in various areas to publish their views. Clearly, there's a lot going on in the blogosphere – but how do you identify what matters and make your own blog relevant?

*...the unique features of blogs create some new dynamics that you can utilize as a business communicator.*

If you've spent much time reading blogs, you'll probably have noticed one key feature of almost all of them: they make heavy use of links. These include links to mainstream media news articles, reference sites, and, of course, other blogs.

It's these links that give blogs credibility. The idea of blog credibility is simple: if many people link to a blog, it's an indicator that the blog's content is relevant and useful to those people. Blogs with few links, on the other hand, are probably only of interest to a small group of people.

As we'll discuss in this paper, there are many kind of links between blogs, and from other media to blogs, that can give you an idea of which blogs are the most important. But how do you find this information? In response for a desire on the part of readers to know more about who's discussing which topics and who's reading what, blog search sites have begun to appear.

The best-known is Technorati, though others (notably Google™) have launched blog search sites. Describing itself as "the authority on what's going on in the world of weblogs," Technorati tracks (at last count) 20.1 million blogs and 1.6 billion links. It is a specialized search engine that you can use to identify the most important blogs – and that you can leverage to raise the profile of your own blog.

The links that Technorati and other such sites track create a web *of credibility*. Links provide a measure not just of blog readership but of the value that bloggers and web publishers put on blogs. By understanding how blogs link together, you can identify the blogs you need to be tracking and focus on get-

ting your blog on the radar of the most influential and credible bloggers – adding your own links into this web of credibility.

## **Linking 101: How Bloggers Link to One Another**

The simplest kind of linking you'll find on blogs is what is called a *blogroll*. This is usually a simple list of blogs that the blog author finds interesting and useful. On a personal blog it may be as simple as a list of friends; on a professional blog it could be a list of colleagues, industry experts, or other opinion leaders.

*...a post on your blog could be picked up by other bloggers, who will then link back to you*

Linking on blogs doesn't stop with the blogroll, however. Typically, blog entries will include commentary on news articles or postings on other blogs. It's standard procedure when blogging to include links to these articles. This means that a post on your blog could be picked up by other bloggers, who will then link back to you. These *in-text links* within blog postings show a higher level of interest in the linked material.

Finally, there are the *comments* that are present on most blogs. Commenting is a way that bloggers involve their readers in their sites. Blog readers can comment on a blog posting, usually including a signature and link back to their own web site and/or blog. Other readers who find the comments interesting can then link back to the commenter's site.

These are the kinds of links that sites like Technorati monitor. Let's look at how the links affect blog readership and rankings. If you use Technorati's blog search feature to find blogs about public relations, you will find (on the day that I'm writing) 52 blogs.

The top blog on Technorati's list of search results is *Micro Persuasion* (<http://www.micropersuasion.com>), written by Steve Rubel, a VP at a PR firm in New York. Technorati identifies 7,219 links to that blog from 1,909 sites, indicating that a lot of people are reading Mr. Rubel's blog and commenting on what he says. As you move down the list, the numbers drop off rapidly, until you reach the end of the list, where there are blogs with no links to them at all.

Obviously, this is a tool that can help you identify the key blogs in your market. You also can search for specific terms in recent posts to see who's talking about your latest news or to search within a topic area for specific words.

The other benefit of linking is that most bloggers look at their web site statistics to see how much traffic their blog gets and where it's coming from. Web tracking software allows a site owner to see referers, the sites that include links to the tracked site that visitors used to get there. Thus, a blogger will notice when traffic comes in from another blog, and often read that blog and possibly link back.

In a sense, tracking of links among blogs becomes a self-perpetuating method of building a core group of trusted bloggers – bloggers who pay attention to one another, discuss one another's writing, and become visible to readers as the important bloggers on a given topic. This is a group you want to belong to for your own market area.

## ***Using Credibility to Build Your Blog***

In practical terms, what can you do to leverage this web of credibility for your own blog?

### **■ *Include a Blogroll***

If you haven't already included a list of related, interesting blogs for your readers, add one right away. Readers who are interested in your blog will click the links, and other bloggers will become aware of you when they check their site statistics and see traffic coming from your blog. Keep the blogroll to a reasonable length – perhaps 15 or 20 blogs at most – so that your site generates traffic to individual blogs at a noticeable rate. And be selective about who goes on your blogroll; while you might be tempted to list everyone related to your industry, it's more useful for your readers (and thus more productive for you) to pick the best blogs for your subtle endorsement.

### **■ *Read Other Blogs and Write about Them***

If you read a posting on another blog about a hot industry topic and have something to add, write your own blog post on the subject and link back to the original. You are starting an inter-blog conversation about a current topic; many more of your readers will click on these links than on those in your blogroll.

## ■ **Comment on Other Blogs**

Commenting is a great way to draw attention to your own blog. Readers will see that you are someone with knowledge and something to say, and follow links from your comments back to your blog. Be careful, though; *you don't want to write comments that look like spam*. If your comment adds nothing but a plug for your own blog, you're more likely to alienate than attract readers.

## ■ **Watch Site Statistics**

If you're not already monitoring your blog statistics, find out what your blog provider or web hosting provider (or your corporate IT department) has to offer. If you've got nothing, there are free tools such as Sitemeter (<http://www.sitemeter.com>) that provide basic tracking tools that should meet your needs.

Take a look at your traffic and in particular your referrers. You can see which web sites and specific pages on web sites are sending the most traffic your way. If you're not familiar with them, go have a look; someone might already be writing about you!

## ■ **Get Yourself on Technorati**

We've already talked about how you can use Technorati to find and evaluate blogs. You can also use Technorati to increase the visibility of your own blog.

If you're publishing a blog, you are likely already listed on Technorati. Search it and see. You should also *claim your blog* on Technorati and see where you rank. This is Technorati's process by which you can identify yourself as a blog owner.

Make sure that when your blog is updated, it pings Technorati to let it know that you've got a new post to be indexed and made available to searchers. Most blog management software can do this automatically; check the Technorati site for details on how to make sure you've got this set up correctly.

Use Technorati tags. Tags are a method of enhancing Technorati search results so that your posts appear there. Think of a tag as associating a category with a blog post; searchers can then find your post under that tag on Technorati. You can think of tags like keywords that you use to optimize

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search engine results for your web site; at the moment, some of the most active Technorati tags are votes, blogging, and Firefox. Check the Technorati site for more details on how to use tags.

### ■ **Publish an RSS Feed**

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a technology that lets readers subscribe to your blog and read it through RSS-enabled software, web sites, and web browsers. This makes it easy for them to keep up with what you're publishing without having to remember to come back to your web site. RSS is analogous to a news distribution service, such as PRNewswire or Business Wire, that pushes stories from organizations or individuals out to a variety of publications and wire services, except RSS pushes information from anyone who publishes an RSS feed to personal news gathering software.

The technology hasn't been widely used yet, but it is growing rapidly, and RSS support will be part of the next version of Microsoft's Internet Explorer. Most blog management software will automatically publish an RSS feed for your blog, so it's a small effort that will provide increasing rewards in the future.

### **A New Option: Automated Linking by Web Publishers**

Several weeks ago, the blogosphere witnessed an interesting new development. The web sites [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) and [newsweek.com](http://newsweek.com), both owned by the Washington Post Company, added a new feature to their articles: a *Who's Blogging?* sidebar.

Most articles on both sites now automatically include a list of bloggers who are commenting on the article, generated via Technorati. For example, if you're reading an article on the *Washington Post* web site, you can easily click links to find out who has written about that article on their blogs and go read those blogs.

What this means for you, as a communicator, is that the value of commenting on those news stories just increased. If you see an article on either of those sites that's related to your blog topic, write about it and link back. In an hour or so, your blog will be listed with other bloggers who've written about the article, and you're likely to see blog visitors coming in via those sites.

Of course, the list of blogs also includes Technorati data on the credibility of each entry, based on incoming links to the blog. This is where your investment in linking to, writing about, and commenting on other blogs pays off; if you've successfully gotten others to link to your blog, you'll be that much more prominent on the Technorati lists that the Washington Post and Newsweek are using.

It also creates a great opportunity when you write articles on niche topics. While an article on a major Congressional vote or a natural disaster will probably show links to hundreds of bloggers, one about a new scientific discovery or narrow policy issue will have far fewer. If that article happens to be relevant to you, your link is a source of qualified, interested blog readers.

It's likely that other publications will pick up on this idea and do similar blogrolls in their content. Pay attention to the media relevant to your industry so you can seize these opportunities as they appear.

## **What about search engines?**

When you review your site statistics, you are likely to find a fair amount of traffic coming from search engines such as Google and Yahoo!®. How does this relate to the link-related traffic described above?

*...design your blog with an eye toward optimizing the results of search engine queries.*

Search engine traffic is still important, and you should design your blog with an eye toward optimizing the results of search engine queries. You also should consider using sponsored search advertising such as Google Adwords or Yahoo! Search Marketing (formerly Overture). However, keep in mind some differences between the kinds of visitors and results you'll get.

Web searchers probably are not looking for blogs. That doesn't mean that the traffic isn't useful, or they won't find your blog valuable, but they are a different kind of reader than the bloggers and blog readers using Technorati (or new blog search engines such as Google's blog search, currently in beta).

So, while regular search engines will bring readers to your blog, they are less likely to bring regular readers who are accustomed to following blogs. And that means they are less likely to bring readers who will help raise your blog's credibility through links back to you from their own sites. Search engine optimization is a critical part of your web strategy, but it does not replace the kind of *blog optimization* that we are discussing in this paper.

Don't neglect search, but recognize that it's a different type of strategy than reaching out to other bloggers through linking and commenting.

### ***Conclusion: Take Advantage of the Unique Dynamics of Blogging***

If you view blogs as just another way to publish web content, you're likely to miss some of the benefits of using them in your public relations and marketing programs. Understand how blogs become widely-read and influential, and you can raise your own profile – both by talking to the right bloggers in your outreach efforts, and by raising the profile of your own blog.

### ***About Mt.Vernon PR & Communications***

Mt.Vernon PR & Communications (MVPR) provides a full range of public relations and marketing communications services to companies and associations on the move, in a hurry, and determined to stay on top. We specialize in creating and enhancing your visibility and credibility in the marketplace, using your unique capabilities and expertise as the building blocks. For more information about Mt.Vernon PR & Communications, please visit our web site at [www.mtvernonpr.com](http://www.mtvernonpr.com)

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