

Blogging 101: Blog Basics for Communications and Marketing Professionals

If you're like most people, a year ago the word "blog" probably made you think of a character from a science fiction movie. In a very short time, however, this abbreviation for "web log" has become a common term, and blog use is on the rise.

Some of this growth was due to the 2004 presidential campaign and the role that blogs played in political debate. It would be a mistake, however, to think of blogs as a political or news reporting phenomenon. There are blogs covering almost any topic you can imagine.

By the end of 2004, 27% of American Internet users said that they read blogs – 32 million people in all, and a 58% jump over a February 2004 survey. Seven percent of Internet users said that they have created their own blogs.

Nevertheless, only 38% of Internet users say they know what a blog is. Despite all the rapid growth of blogging in 2004, it seems clear that this phenomenon is still far from reaching its full scope.

With just a little more than a third of Internet users familiar with the concept of blogs, it's no wonder so many people are asking, "So what is a blog, anyway?" This white paper will discuss the basics of blogging for marketers and business communicators, enabling you to start formulating your own blog strategy.

What's a blog?

So, what is a blog? And what is not a blog? The word "blog" is just a contraction of "web log," and, in its simplest form, a blog is just that: a log or journal on the web. Think of a blog as an online diary or set of notes, updated regularly and presented in chronological order.

Content and Format vs. Technology

The important thing about this definition is what it does not specify. Blogs are not a type of technology, although software that helps users blog has appeared. A blog is a kind of web content, defined by its chronological format.

Blogs can be about almost anything, and much of the content on blogs could be presented as a traditional web page. The blog has become popular for several reasons:

- It's very easy for the blog author to maintain the site; she or he need only add a new posting at the top of the blog to update it. Blog software makes this process much easier than adding content through a traditional web content management system.
- Blogs make it easy for readers to see when there is new content — it's at the top of the page and it's dated. Further, the idea of a blog implies that there will be new content on a regular basis, so the reader knows that return visits are likely to be productive.
- Finally, syndication technologies such as RSS and Atom make it possible for readers to subscribe to blogs, getting new content delivered to them automatically.

Personal Voice

While the blog format can contain almost anything, there's one aspect of blogs worth noting. It's not a requirement, but it's close to one: blogs have a voice. It's rare to find a successful, widely read blog that doesn't have an identifiable author (or authors) with his or her own style and point of view. This is part of the reason that blogs have been so successful; in a sea of corporate and institutional web sites written

by committee, blogs have stood out as unique voices: brash, often provocative, sometimes offensive, and frequently very personal.

This doesn't mean that you have to be aggressive or shocking when you blog, but it does suggest that a blog is not the place to put standard informational web content, such as your corporate background piece or a list of available services. A blog is a good choice for content that is topical and expresses an opinion — your stance on a new technology, an opinion of how new laws will affect organizations such as yours, or updates on a research project.

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Why would I — or my company — want a blog?

Individuals have created blogs to write about everything from their daily activities to their favorite music, their political views, their hobbies, or even intimate personal revelations. But what can a marketer or a professional communicator do with a blog? How can you use blogs to support your organization's goals?

Some of the reasons that organizations already have started blogging are:

- ▶ providing site visitors with regular updates on important issues and topics — for example, a political organization that wants its constituents to be aware of progress on legislation,
- ▶ spotlighting staff members who have a particular expertise — for example, giving the director of research and development a platform to discuss technology trends, and
- ▶ bringing site visitors back by offering frequently updated content.

One of the best ways to see how others are using blogs is to read them! More companies and CEOs are blogging today than you might think. Take a look at some of the blogs listed at the URLs below to see who's doing it. The growing numbers of corporations getting into blogging might help convince your management that it's no longer a fringe activity.

A list of corporate blogs is available at:

<http://www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php/Resources/CorporateBlogsList>

A list of CEO blogs:

<http://www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php/Resources/CEOBlogsList>

A list of Product blogs:

<http://www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php/Resources/ProductBlogsList>

Broadly speaking, there are three ways to take advantage of the blogging phenomenon: **create a blog** or blogs for your organization, **advertise** in others' blogs, or **engage** with the authors of widely read blogs to get them to write about you or issues relevant to your organization. Each of these options has its own unique advantages, as discussed below.

Create a blog

Creating a blog is probably the first thing that you thought of once you heard of blogging. And for many organizations, it's the right first step. However, if you want to be successful with blogging, you need to remember what it can and cannot do for you.

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A blog is a great way to showcase knowledge and expertise within your organization. Most of us have colleagues who are experts in their field – whether it's the lead software architect at an IT firm, the head of R&D at a biotechnology company, or the head of issues research for a nonprofit advocacy group. Turning that person into a blogger is a way to invite the outside world to share that knowledge and reflects favorably on your organization.

You should consider creating these kinds of blogs if you have experts on hand, they can write reasonably well (or you have a ghostwriter for them), there is enough new information to allow for regular blog updates, and there's an audience interested in what they have to say.

Even if you can meet all of those criteria, there are some pitfalls to consider and avoid. The most difficult issue for most organizations is the very nature of a blog: it's an individual's writing. To keep readers interested, you will have to give your bloggers more freedom than you would if they were writing a white paper for your company to distribute or being interviewed as an organization's representative.

A second pitfall, which impacts public companies, is the possibility of a blog violating SEC rules. If, however, you apply the same rules to blogging as you do to the media, there should be no issues. Employees or managers who have blogs should observe the SEC disclosure rules and prominently advise that they

are employees of the company. The old adage holds true here — *if you don't want to see it on page one, don't say it!* (If you have questions, you should discuss them with your legal counsel.)

Before undertaking a blog, take an honest look at your organizational culture. It's not necessary (or smart) to let your bloggers say anything they want, but, for the blog to work, you will need to give them relatively free reign within some established guidelines. If that won't fly in your organization, it may not be ready for blogging.

Once you publish your initial content, how often should you update your blog? There's no hard and fast rule, but once a week is a bare minimum, and several times a week is much better. For example, Ana Marie Cox, author of the widely read Washington insider/political gossip blog Wonkette (www.wonkette.com), is contractually required by her blog's sponsor to post to her blog 12 times daily in order to ensure frequent visits (and thus ad impressions).

Advertise in a blog

Yes, you now can advertise in a blog. This is still a developing area, so advertising on a blog won't be as simple as with other online media, but it is possible, and it's a growing trend.

We are seeing the emergence of "blog ad networks," which function much like traditional online ad networks. You can place an ad through one of these networks and it will appear on blogs that are connected to that network. This is a rapidly developing space, so it is difficult to make specific recommendations; however, there's a good article on blog ad networks in About.com's blog section (<http://weblogs.about.com/od/adnetworks/>).

There are also many blogs that solicit individual advertisers. To identify these blogs, you'll need to monitor blogs relevant to your area of interest, and see who has advertising.

Is advertising on blogs a good idea for you? It's worth considering if you can identify blogs that are good matches for your organization. For example, if you publish political books, blogs by political commentators (whether "official journalists" or self-made pundits with big readership) are likely to work well. If your company develops software for non-profit associations, you might want to sponsor a blog by an association IT director.

Be sure, however, that you are comfortable with the blogs you are considering. One of the most appealing things for blog readers is their freewheeling nature. It's very likely that, at some point, you'll be advertising on a blog that contains some content or statements you're not happy with. Think of it as the traditional editorial/advertising divide in traditional media. You shouldn't advertise on a blog that regularly attacks your organization, but you should be able to live with some content that isn't your ideal message.

Engage bloggers

Often overlooked, this is one of the best ways that you can use blogs: by treating bloggers with large or influential audiences in your space the same way you would treat any opinion leader, such as an editor or analyst. Many blogs include commenting features that allow you to respond directly to blog entries by posting your own comment. You also can approach bloggers to tell them about your organization much as you would pitch an editor or writer.

For example, if you work for a technology company and you find a blogger writing about your product or service, you may want to offer him or her information about your product, or add useful information to the blog through comments. It's important to realize that the same editorial concerns that editors have are important to the best bloggers as well. If you use comment sections of blogs to simply place thinly veiled ads, they will be identified as "comment spam" and you're likely to find your entries deleted or blocked. However, if you can win over a blogger through standard PR techniques, you may have an opinion leader saying good things about your company or your products.

How do you decide what approach(es) to take?

As you consider these options - starting your own blogs, advertising in blogs, working with bloggers - you'll need to take your own situation into account.

Do you have thought leaders or experts on hand with enough content and time to write a blog? Will blogging get the approval of management and the legal staff? Will it help deliver your message, reach a specific audience, increase interest in your organization, or otherwise positively impact your strategic plan? If so, launching a blog is a good idea.

Are there existing blogs whose audiences are a good match for your target market? If so, evaluate advertising options as you would any medium - and if those blogs don't yet carry advertising, keep monitoring them, or make a proposal for some kind of sponsorship.

Are there bloggers talking about topics of interest to your customers? These are people you want to get to know – start an outreach program.

It's likely that you'll want to use some combination of these approaches. Nearly everyone should be identifying influential bloggers in their space and treating them as editorial contacts; choosing whether to start a blog or advertise in blogs depends on your specific goals and objectives.

Getting Your Blog Started

Once you've decided to launch a blog, how do you begin? The following are some brief guidelines to help you get going. A forthcoming white paper will include more detailed descriptions of blogging software and the mechanics of launching your blog, but the guidelines below will help you scope out your blog project.

Select your bloggers, topics, and guidelines

It helps to have a well-defined mission statement for your blogs. Write a one-paragraph description of the blog topic so that everyone involved can agree on the parameters of the blog. You should include the overall topic, the kinds of posts you will include, and the expected frequency of blog postings.

For example, MVPR's blog mission might read as follows:

The MVPR Blog will discuss the latest trends in public relations and interactive marketing, picking up on news and emerging trends and offering commentary about what PR and marketing techniques make sense for MVPR clients and other interested professionals. The blog will be updated three times per week. The blog will allow comments from readers in order to foster discussion of interactive marketing topics.

Once you've determined what the blog will be and who will write it, it's a good idea to create a brief *standards or appropriate use document*. This can be as simple as "no profanity, no confidential information," or include stipulations like "no direct attacks on competitors, no personal attacks," and so on.

Ideally this will prevent postings that cause problems, or at least make it easier to resolve any issues that arise from postings. Be careful, however, not to make it so restrictive that the blog does not have its own voice or viewpoint – otherwise you'll end up with a fairly bland blog that nobody reads.

Choose a blog platform

You'll need to select a platform for creating and publishing your blog. Once again, there are many choices, and your specific situation will dictate which one is best for your organization.

If you have an IT department, start by asking for advice there. Your IT people know the specifics of your web servers and will likely have some ideas about the best way to go. In fact, your current web content management system may already have some blog capabilities built in.

If you can't get help from IT, or are small enough that you are your own IT department, there are a number of options to pick from (and more appearing daily).

Hosted blogging platforms are the easiest way to start. These services offer a web-based interface to manage and create blog postings, and space on their servers for your blog. You can set up a blog in minutes. The costs range from free (though that might mean that third-party ads will appear on your blog) to about \$10 per month.

The drawbacks of these services are:

- **Less flexibility.** The services will generally provide you with a number of templates for your blog, but may be limited in how much customization is available to put your own branding on the blog.
- **Their URL.** While you may get server space to host the blog, the URL will not be your own: for example, prmkt.blogspot.com rather than www.prmkt.com. Some hosted services will let you use their software tools to publish to your own web space (an extra cost).
- **Performance.** If the hosted service has performance problems, your blog will be affected, and it will be out of your control. Since these are often consumer-oriented services with free offerings, there may be times when the service or your blog isn't available, or loads very slowly.
- **Bandwidth.** Hosted services will have limits on the bandwidth you can use. In some cases these will be specified, and in others they are informal (if the provider sees that you are using a lot of bandwidth, you may hear from them). This means that if your blog becomes very popular, you may incur additional costs.

Despite these drawbacks, hosted services can be a good way to start blogging. Some of the larger hosted blog providers are [Blogger](#), [Typepad](#) from Six Apart, [Bubblr](#), and [Inknoise](#).

Installable blog software. These are software packages that you install on a web server. That's not as daunting as it may sound; generally you can install them onto a shared web hosting service. Once installed you have a web-based interface for managing your blog. (You must be sure that your web server or hosting service provides the database technology required by the blog software, but most software creators can recommend web hosting services that meet these requirements.)

The main advantage of these packages is the flexibility you get in managing the look and feel of your blog. With the help of a web designer, you can create your own templates and make the blog look like part of your web site.

The disadvantages of these services are:

- ▶ **Hosting.** You must provide server space to host the blog. The upside of this is greater control of the availability of your blog; you're not at the mercy of a blog service provider's ability to manage their servers correctly. You'll also pay for hosting and bandwidth on a specific bill; web hosting providers always have formal bandwidth limits in their hosting agreements, so you should consider how much traffic you expect when choosing a provider and service plan.
- ▶ **Management.** With control and flexibility comes responsibility to manage everything. Once you install the package, it's up to you (or your IT staff) to install software updates.
- ▶ **Comment spam.** A whole new spam industry is evolving to post spam comments to blogs – basically, a way for unscrupulous marketers to build traffic to their web sites at your expense. You might find that ads for “VIAGRA” are appearing in the comments to your blog entries! Hosted services will deal with a lot of this for you, but if you are using an installable blog package, you will have to monitor this. The good news is that these packages do include features to help block comment spam.

There are two major software packages (as well as many lesser-known choices): [Moveable Type](#), from Six Apart, which is a commercial package; and [WordPress](#), which is an open source offering. That means there's no price tag for the actual software, but also no tech support department to call for help. (There is, however, a thriving WordPress developer community and lots of places to get help online.)

Once you've selected a hosted service or installed your software, you're ready to start blogging!

Conclusion – Blogs are here, and changing fast

Like any new kind of communication medium, blogging is evolving rapidly. We have tried to keep the information in this white paper general enough to be relevant but specific enough to help you get started, but there's no doubt that there will be new issues, options, and features to think about in the months to come.

A forthcoming paper will provide more details about the specifics of setting up a blog, syndicating your blog content with RSS or Atom, as well as information on emerging blog technologies such as multimedia blogging (incorporating sound and video into your blog). To receive this paper, as well as updates to this blog overview, please join our mailing list.

If you have feedback, additional information, or blog experiences to share, you can reach the author at jwhiteside@mtvernonpr.com.

Mt.Vernon PR & Communications (MVPR) can assist you with all facets of planning and launching your blog strategy, from creating a blog (including setting goals and policies, writing, and publishing your blog) to blog advertising and editorial outreach to blog authors in your market.

Appendix: Communications and Marketing Blogs

There are countless communications and marketing blogs today, ranging from single practitioners sharing their views to agency-sponsored blogs. This list is not exhaustive, and we offer it simply as a sampling of what is available, without endorsing any particular blog or suggesting that other blogs not listed here are not worthwhile. Use it to start your exploration of blogs on communications and marketing.

A PR Guru's Musings, <http://www.20six.co.uk/stuartbruce>
A Shel of My Former Self, <http://blog.holtz.com/>
CommonCraft, <http://www.commoncraft.com>
Contentious, <http://blog.contentious.com>
Corporate Hallucinations, <http://www.ragan.com/stevesblog>
Corporate Engagement, <http://trevorcook.typepad.com>
Corporate PR, <http://ringblog.typepad.com/corporatepr>
Desirable Roasted Coffee, <http://allanjenkins.typepad.com>
Diva Marketing, http://bloombergmarketing.blogs.com/bloomberg_marketing/
FlackLife, <http://flacklife.blogspot.com>
Media Guerrilla, http://mmanuel.typepad.com/media_guerrilla
Micropersuasion, <http://steverubel.typepad.com>
Nevon, <http://nevon.typepad.com>
Online Marketing Blog, <http://toprank.blogspot.com/>
Online PR Thoughts, <http://online-pr.blogspot.com>
PR Communications, <http://pr.typepad.com>
PR Meets the WWW, <http://blog.basturea.com>
PR Opinions, <http://www.natterjackpr.com>
PR Studies, <http://prstudies.typepad.com/weblog>
Reality Marketing, <http://realitymarketing.blogspot.com>
Strategic Public Relations, <http://prblog.typepad.com>
The Bach Door, <http://bachdoor.blogspot.com>
The birth of POP! PR, <http://pop-pr.blogspot.com>
What's Next, <http://www.whatsnextblog.com>

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

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