

# Using Company Blogs to Win over Decision Makers

Annie Galvin Teich

Published online: 21 October 2008  
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2008

**Abstract** Company blogs offer publishers a media platform to build online communities around issues of interest to customers and prospects. Web 2.0 represents the fundamental shift from “old” marketing where publishers engaged in one-directional push messaging and “new” marketing where customers and prospects are also creators of content and key messages in response to their individual experiences. Whether companies decide to participate in the online conversation or not, they and their products are being discussed. To maintain credibility and support their brands, publishers must engage their audiences online. Creating a company blog as the centerpiece of a Social Media strategy can be a meaningful investment in a publisher’s longevity.

**Keywords** Blogs · Bloggers · Social media · Blog search engines · Technorati · Customer evangelists · Online communities · New communication channels

## Introduction

New statistics released this week by Technorati, the leading blog search engine, indicate that in 2007, 50% of U.S. Internet users were blog readers. That is more than 94.1 million Americans. Of that, 22.6 million are active bloggers. Blogs are just one part of a larger communication revolution called Social Media which is the use of technology tools for online conversations, information sharing and community building in text, audio and video.

One of the essentials in building a Social Media strategy for your company is to find where your customers and prospects are gathering and engage them there.

---

A. G. Teich (✉)  
The Teich Group, 26 Bluff Ridge Court, Greensboro, NC 27455, USA  
e-mail: ateich@theteichgroup.net

This is the reverse of decades of “push” marketing in which companies pushed their message out to as many people as would listen in order to build awareness for their brand or product. Whether or not your company has developed a Social Media strategy, your customers and competitors are talking about you online. Ninety percent of bloggers say they post reviews about their favorite (or not) brands of music, movies and books. Thirty-seven percent of bloggers write and post about these things frequently (Technorati). You ignore these conversations at your peril. If you want to influence how your company is perceived, you must participate in this online conversation.

Although individual, independent bloggers are still the largest online group by far, most companies are moving into the Blogosphere with branded blogs and online communities. Newspapers, ad agencies, and consumer brands were early adopters and have been closely watched by publishing companies. Whereas early corporate efforts focused on augmenting print content with online content, most have migrated to a model where the flagship content is online, where it can be updated frequently, and the print version features a portion of the online content. With increased postage costs threatening profitability, some publishers have moved exclusively to online publishing.

Go ahead and bellyache about blogs. But you cannot afford to close your eyes to them, because they’re simply the most explosive outbreak in the information world since the Internet itself. And they’re going to shake up just about every business—including yours.

–Business Week, May 2, 2008

### **Creating Blogs that Expand Your Market**

One of the biggest concerns about launching a company blog is the fear that businesses will lose control of their messages. This will happen regardless of whether you blog or not. Thousands of consumers post their opinions about companies and products daily on their personal blogs and a multitude of social community sites. The only way publishers can be credible to a 21st century audience, is to communicate in a 21st century manner—online.

Given that integrating a blog or blogs into your marketing strategy is a good idea, what should publishers expect the payoff to be? Technology evangelists Robert Scoble and Shel Israel assert in their book *Naked Conversations* that, “blogging is the best tool so far for enabling companies to convert customers into word-spreading evangelists.” Many of us have had the experience of standing in a company booth at a conference or trade show and listening in as a customer “sells” a friend on the benefits of one or more of our products or services. That is the value of customer evangelists and can be one of the benefits of incorporating blogs into your marketing plans. Your goal is to turn your blog readers into product evangelists. As much as possible, you want “others”, customers rather than employees, to praise your company’s products and services to the world.

As you build your company blog, one of the primary objectives is to provide information that satisfies the needs of your reader community—customers,

prospects and influencers. You also want to promote your product offerings as solutions for your online community. On a traditional website, these objectives can be difficult to accomplish without your content coming across as shameless self-promotion. In a blog, both goals can be achieved in a way that does not turn your readers off.

Here are four ways to connect with your blog community while furthering your company's business goals:

1. *Case studies.* When prospects and customers search the web for information, they are looking for answers and solutions. Use case studies to pull readers in through compelling storytelling and satisfy their urge to see a challenge resolved. When readers and educators see examples of your books and other products making the difference, you win them over.
2. *Open threads.* As you build an audience, periodically ask open-ended questions about what their needs are, or how your audience has attempted to resolve an issue in the past. As people share their experiences with others, it builds a sense of community that links value with your blog and ultimately your brand. An effective tactic is to look for the needs identified in open thread discussions and develop case studies to respond to them.
3. *Interviews with readers.* For educational publishers a suggested strategy is to identify thought leaders and conduct interviews with them on how they handle challenges in their school, district or curriculum area. By doing this, you strengthen the sense of community and attract new visitors. If you ask questions in your article that touch on the needs your product offerings satisfy, you continue to plant seeds in your readers' minds to view your offerings as more authoritative.
4. *Reader polls.* We all love polls because they tell us where we and our needs and opinions compare to those in our same arena. Create a list of all of the needs your products address. Ask readers which needs are most important to them, and why.

For both trade and educational publishers, one of the critical questions is, “how does it change your business when *everyone* is a potential publisher?” It might not change it at all, of course, but it is important to understand that the essence of Web 1.0 was the sharing of “authoritative” information online meaning content that was distributed by recognized authorities such as newspapers and publishers. Web 2.0 is about user-generated content, so it is common for bloggers to review or respond to individual products and customer experiences.

In the blogging world, it is the writers' points of view and clarity of expression that make blogs compelling reading—or not. No matter the topic, bloggers are encouraged to write with passion and honesty, and this can be a positive or negative experience. If it is negative, having an online presence will not only alert you early; giving you the opportunity to exert some damage control, but an existing online presence also contributes to your credibility. Authenticity and transparency are the currency in the Blogosphere, and there are those who define success by the size of their readership or their ability to connect with others of like mind. It is always best to be honest and forthright in explaining or rectifying a mistake or situation online.

If done early and sincerely, apologies and admission of wrong thinking can boost your favorability ranking.

### **Building an Audience**

So how do publishers engage in the conversation to promote their books and products without offending? Here is a suggestion from Kassia Krozser on the blog *Booksquare*:

While there is no way for publishers to control the message about their books—the discussion is happening in too many places on too many levels—publishers can participate in more proactive ways. Rather than worrying about the future of reading, why not use today’s technology to entice readers and remind yourselves why you joined this business in the first place?

For educational publishers, the reason most of us entered the industry can be found in our company’s mission statement which is usually some variant of “making a difference in a child’s life and learning.” So using a publisher’s blog to address particular educational issues affecting customers in the publisher’s specific area of expertise or sharing research and other non-company resources can be a valuable service to a publisher’s community and will be welcomed as such.

As with any other marketing strategy, developing a corporate blog requires planning. Without a plan, there is no focus or continuity and the effort falls flat. In fact, a poorly executed blog can do more harm than good. Why? Because you’ve promised something you did not deliver. Good planning requires that you are clear about the goals your company wants to accomplish, and then committing sufficient resources to effectively realize those goals. Here are some suggestions to maximize your investment in a company blog.

### **Determine Objectives**

First, identify what you want to achieve with your corporate blog. You might want to highlight customer success stories; build profiles for reference customers; share company research or vendor neutral white paper that outlines the research on a particular issue or trend; dive more deeply into the product back story; or simply establish your company as a content expert.

Other objectives include building a strong subscriber base, fostering a sense of community so that people continue reading your blog and asking for feedback on existing products and ideas for new offerings.

### **Determine Your Audience’s Objectives**

Once you have identified your blog’s objectives from your company’s vantage point, step back and determine the objectives of your target audience. Make no

mistake; they are different from yours. Your audience has most likely done a fair amount of research on you before you ever become aware of them through your blog. They are looking to you for solutions to their problems or pain points. Put yourself in their place. Approach every customer interaction with the customer's point of view uppermost in your mind.

The most important thing to understand is that this blog is not an opportunity for your company to pontificate on its key messages. It is an opportunity to create conversations *around* your key messages. This is an essential distinction. You must focus on meeting the needs of your audience first. Using this strategy will create strong, steady interest in your blog.

Talk to your customers and prospects in regular conversations. Establish a sense of trust. What are they looking for that they can't find? Talk to your customer service representatives. More than anyone else in your organization, they know what is on your customers' minds. Monitor the content of educational conferences and seminars to ensure you are staying on top of current trends and issues.

### **Determine Meaningful and Memorable Content**

*Create a list of appropriate topics* for blog postings and articles and decide who will write these. Is it written by one person or several people? There are advantages and disadvantages to both. Single author blogs have innate consistency of tone, but it is an extraordinary responsibility to write multiple posts each week. In some ways, a blog is like a 24/7 news organization. You need a lot of content. It is essential to lock this down early. For many companies, a group blog is a good solution allowing a company to present a variety of perspectives from within the organization and to share the writing responsibility.

*Create a blog personality.* What is the blog voice and tone to be? All blogs must find a way to become a compelling, must-read for their audience. The most successful blogs have a definite perspective—even an edgy tone to them. Readers are looking for personality and this is the place to let it shine. Readers will follow someone who honestly and passionately shares their thoughts and feelings.

*Create a schedule.* An effective blog requires regular care and feeding. It is a dynamic, evolving website and should be a top priority for someone in your organization. Reaping the benefit of this strategy means a long-term commitment to your audience. It is a bit like gardening. Not only do you have to plant seeds and develop a good root system, you need to water and fertilize to reap the harvest.

### **Meeting Expectations**

People want to hear real-world stories from others just like themselves. It helps them feel better about the buying process. They want to talk about the newest approaches, the latest theories, real-world practice, and the benefits and drawbacks others have experienced. For educational publishers, blog readers want to feel as if the publishers they trust with their student's education have a real face and an

authentic voice. Buyers need to feel they can relate to publishers and depend on them.

A corporate blog effectively accomplishes those goals. It also gives your company a significant return on the time you invest in the blog's development. Your corporate blog allows you to build your company's credibility and create an ever-growing community of customer advocates. These advocates market your products via word-of-mouth, as they discuss your offerings on your site and on other blogs. A blog gives you the chance to showcase success stories from various schools and districts using your products. A blog can also let you share your research about why your particular products provide students with a distinct learning advantage.

Blogs build authority and, if well written and authentic, will build trust. Buyers have always bought from those they trusted and believed in. Any influencer should be important to you even if they are not "strictly" the decision maker. Why? The Internet is the great equalizer. People will flock to your company website if you demonstrate that you are the knowledge expert in your niche and that you can solve their problems with your products. Customer brand loyalty will come to you naturally if you keep your brand promises.

There are additional social media strategies that publishers can employ to attract new prospects to their offering through a company blog. In order for those strategies to be successful, you first must have a compelling blog of personal interest. A fundamental difference in Web 2.0 is that you don't *sell* as much as you *enable* people to buy from you. A proven strategy is to develop a blog that delivers an authoritative voice on an issue or a range of issues. To be a credible and successful blogger, you must:

- Tell a coherent story with a clear point of view
- Be sincere and honest to earn trust
- Show appreciation to your readers
- Read and link to other blogs

These suggestions and strategies will help you create content that builds community in a way that demonstrates that you understand the needs of your audience. This is compelling marketing as it is human nature to go where we feel most understood. We feel more comfortable doing business with those people and companies we like and who we think best understand and meet our needs.

As the Internet continues to develop and provides new multi-directional communication channels, the number of decision makers or purchase influencers who find the information they are seeking online will also increase. An authentic corporate blog will help keep your publishing company in the forefront of the community that is most interested in your products.