

Question

There is debate on the merits of blogs. What factors should a business consider when wanting to develop awareness and interaction through a blog environment? (In other words best practices and things to avoid and why)

Blogs and Business, Good or Bad

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The Blog, a website maintained by an individual who writes topics (posts as they are called in blogging terms) on what they are interested in and to have their 2 cents on issues. Still, today most of the blogs on the internet are run by individuals or at most 4 or 5 people that share a common interest. The most common type of blog is an online diary of the happenings of a person's life. In addition to the textual version of a blog there are a few other types of blogs on the internet, they are;

- Artlog (Art)
- Photoblog (Photography)
- Shetchblog (Sketches)
- Vlog (Videos)
- Podcasting (Audio)

Podcasting has become more popular in the recent years with the release of the iPod on the market, although you do not actually need an iPod or MP3 player to subscribe to a podcast.

Corporate Blogs

So what does this have to do with business? The answer to that is - a lot. The corporate blog is a blog that is run by a corporate body or business. This is not to be confused with a group blog where authors share a common interest. The corporate blog can be broken into three different categories; internal, external and CEO Blogs.

Internal Blog

This blog is usually made up of topics made by employees of a business. These types of blogs are not publicly viewable as they are usually on an intranet environment. They offer the employees a place to discuss topics without having to call a meeting or if someone wanted some feedback on an idea. The internal blog is also a good place to share ideas and tips within the organisation and is a common replacement for using the company emails to pass around miscellaneous hints and tips.

External Blog

Most of the blogs that are classified as a corporate blog are external blogs. This type of blog is online and anyone who has internet access can view the blog anytime. The external blog has taken the place of the news posting systems as they are usually used for announcing new or updated products and services that are major milestones. Being a blog run by and hosted by a single company they will be biased towards the way that the company operates and the services that they offer.

The corporate external blog is a great addition to the web presence of any organisation, big or small. It is a great place for company employees to offer advice. Hints and tips to the general public, along with the general topics about the company.

CEO Blog

The CEO Blog is a type of corporate blog that could easily be a personal blog if allowed. Because it is more individual than an internal or external blog it is suggested that the CEO of a company should not have a blog for their sole use under the corporate banner.

For shareholders, both current and future, the CEO Blog can be a very useful tool when making decisions regarding their investment. There is a level of transparency that the CEO will give in this type of blog about how they run the company and what type of person they are. There is a large possibility that if the CEO posts topics that may contradict a decision in a press release or in the company profile shareholders may pull out and future shareholders may go elsewhere.

A corporate blog does not have to be simply a list of press releases put in a blog format. Depending on the nature of the business and the level of quality the authors of the blog post, they can be an interesting read even sometimes funny. One of the best I have read is the DreamHost Blog (<http://blog.dreamhost.com/>). The way that they have constructed the blog is to not tell customers about the status of the servers or services that are being offered, but to let visitors know of the latest result of their office basketball team and their views of sometime random topics but most of the blogs will be about something in the IT industry.

The Good, Bad and the Suspect

Now that we know what corporate blogging is, how about we learn how to implement it without too many problems. I will start with the good.

The Good

A corporate blog will allow the general public, and possible clients, to see how your business operates without an email, phone call or stepping a foot into the office. They offer a transparent view of how your employees think and offer information that relates to the products and services you offer.

As mentioned before the external blog is a great place for employees to offer advice and comments on their areas of expertise. This serves to feed the needs of the organisation and its stakeholders by stimulating interaction and disseminating information to the larger corporate environment and the general public.

A good corporate blog will feature posts from all the departments of the organisation. Some of these posts will relate to the products and services, but others will show other things like an office charity drive, topics of interest and even the odd news article. The nature of the beast means that all the posts will reflect on the organisation in a positive way.

Another good point to a corporate blog that has been constructed well is that it can help build relationships with other companies or organisations. This is very beneficial when there are

partnerships or there are multiple offices that have different roles within the company organisational structure.

The Bad

A blog is traditionally a place for people to read about the happenings of a person's life, in the case of a corporate blog this is the day-to-day operation of the organisation. Some information will never be seen on a blog but for the information that is it has to be of a high quality.

Unlike a blog of an individual a corporate blog will be read by people expecting a high level of quality. A corporate blog needs to have their rear covered; as it is online it is open to the world to comment on. Any sign of racism, plagiarism (even a simple copy and paste) or any other suspect behaviour can cause a company a great deal of trouble. If a corporate blog is going to survive you will need to make sure you get legal advice on topics that may offend some people – if in doubt, do not post the topic.

Another point to note is that if the blog is not updated often you may lose traffic to the site quicker than normal. The blog will be an entry point to the organisation and as such it needs to be kept current and up to date.

Things to Avoid

There are things that should not appear on a corporate blog. Like a personal blog, bank account information and such should never be there. Other items that should not make an appearance on a good corporate blog are negative topics about the organisation, colourful language (swearing), and topics that may result in legal matters.

It is tempting to setup an account for everyone in the organisation to post on the blog, but the truth is that not everyone will want to make posts on the blog. There should be a select few that can make contributions. These people will be trusted members of the team as they are posting information to the internet for all to see.

Visitor comments can be a good or a bad thing. News.com.au has made use of the comments for news articles but they are moderated to avoid arguments. If you do not have to allow visitor comments, don't! There are certain posts that may call for the use of comments like surveys, polls and feedback topics, but if it is a notice about a version update of a software release you do not need people to comment there (unless you want to capture market perceptions).

Avoid focusing on topics that have no relation to the nature of the organisation they will shift the focus of the organisation in the readers minds. Instead focus on the achievements the organisation has made and offer topics that relate to the organisation. For example, an organisation that is focused on technology will not benefit from a topic the latest fad diet.

Closing Remarks

So it has been decided that your organisation will have a blog on the website. First of all, if you do not need it or have no value to add to it, do not do it. You would not follow people off a cliff - you do not have to follow them in making a blog.

For a successful blog follow these simple points

- Know your organisation
- Know what others are doing. Have a read of other corporate blogs from other companies in the same industry.
- Pick dedicated, trustworthy people to post to the blog, not the CEO. The CEO can have a separate blog. Small setups may allow the CEO to blog.
- Know who you are blogging for. A corporate blog is not for authors, unlike a personal blog, it is for your customers.
- Do not shut out your audience. Allow visitors to post but only when needed and moderate the comments.
- Stay current, share links. Blogs have features for trackback, where one person posts a link to another persons post on their blog an automatic link will be posted back the persons blog. Make sure your information is current and up to date.
- Most importantly, cover your rear. Everything on the blog will be reflected as company opinions. Get legal advice when required and make sure you have a valid disclaimer and privacy policy that is available on every page of the blog.

By following this guide you should have a good start to a corporate blog. Whenever you venture into anything new research the topic before you make any decisions, once the damage is done it is harder to undo and don't forget to get legal advice if you are in any doubt.