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LOGGING ON TO BLOGGING

New frontier or sacred turf?



HEART TRANSPLANT

A researcher's view of branding p31

**THE TELLING
BOTTOM LINE**

What kind of marketer
are you? p16

A black and white photograph of a man with glasses, wearing a dark shirt, shouting into a microphone. The background is a blurred office setting with windows. The overall tone is energetic and focused.

LOGGING ON TO BLOGGING

New frontier or sacred turf?

Blogs are subtly changing the way audiences think and where they get information they trust. But the very nature of the new medium means marketers may miss the opportunities they present. By Simon Young



The first thing Sandra does when she gets up is switch on the PC. Her daily routine begins with a visit to her own blog – or web log – for comments from visitors to her site. Then, before leaving for work, she checks her friends' blogs for any updates.

Later that day at work Sandra checks a dozen or so blogs she has bookmarked, running the gamut from personal diaries to politics.

Why blogs? Sandra says, "Blogs are good for getting a sense of what people are talking about, or what they're concerned with – for instance, politics. It's encouraging to see that young people do care about what's going on."

Sandra doesn't watch much tv, saying the 'news' it provides is little more than scare tactics and entertainment gossip.

The lion's share of her media intake comes from the internet, as she says, "for better or worse".

Sandra is just one of many people throughout the world who eschew traditional media for the internet in search of unbiased (or differently-biased) news, and information that's more in-depth or personally relevant than the mainstream.

What does it mean to marketers? It means at least two things – blogging is here as a powerful grassroots medium (and therefore a potential PR and advertising medium), and blogging is something that everyone can do, including companies.

But the grassroots nature of blogging means it's virtually invisible to those who don't inhabit the "blogosphere".

In case your eyes are beginning to glaze over, it's probably time to answer an important (and oft-asked) question: what is a blog?

The short answer: it's an abbreviated term for 'web log'.

A blog is essentially a diary on the web that others can see. A simple premise which has ended up evolving into endless possibilities.

Permission marketing guru Seth Godin has categorised blogs into three easily understood groups: news blogs (which often include pithy commentary on current affairs); writers' blogs (these are frequently long monologues); and what Godin calls "our blogs", where the blog

is run by a community. (See "Glossary" below for more detailed descriptions).

Godin admits these definitions may change: "It's early days, and there are bound to be a few other types of blogs as time goes on," he says on his blog.

Despite the recent media coverage blogs have been getting, they're nothing new.

Interactive creative director at Saatchi & Saatchi Tom Eslinger says blogs have been around for as long as the web.

"They're like the reality programming of the internet," says Eslinger, "a reaction to a younger, more sophisticated audience looking for unique channels for their entertainment/news/distraction."

Research Solutions' research and marketing manager Jonathan Dodd sees blogs as tapping into people's basic expressiveness:

“ Blogging is still in the midst of uncontrived innocence. ”

"Talkback radio and the happiness of people to respond to market research surveys shows that people always like to feel that their opinions are being heard and valued."

Blogs have also been compared to political pamphleteering, a common practice before the web, particularly in America of the 1700s.

Blogger Chris Locke, co-author of the 1999 book "The Cluetrain Manifesto", points out the similarities on his blog www.rageboy.com.

He quotes George Orwell's words on pamphleteering. They are an eerily accurate description of blogs:

"The pamphlet is a one-man show. One has complete freedom of expression, including, if one chooses, the freedom to be scurrilous, abusive and seditious; or, on the other hand, to be more detailed, serious and 'highbrow' than is ever possible in a newspaper or in most kinds of periodicals..."

"Above all, the pamphlet does not have to follow any prescribed pattern. It can be in prose or in verse, it can consist largely of maps or statistics or quotations, it can take the form of a story, a fable, a letter, an essay, a dialogue or a piece of 'reportage'."

"All that is required of it is that it shall be topical, polemical and short."

Reality programming, talkback radio, political pamphlets... it hardly sounds like the stuff marketing departments are keen on, or even allowed to do.

Yet smart, courageous organisations are harnessing blogging to market to both external and internal audiences.

Ben McConnell, co-author of the book "Creating Customer Evangelists" (and, of course, a blogger), sees three ways blogs are used for marketing.

Consultants use blogs to build a name for themselves by demonstrating their subject matter knowledge, ceos and executives blog to get closer to customers and steer the direction of their industries, and employees of companies blog about their product category.

"By and large," says McConnell, "blog-

Glossary

Blog (n) – a web log or online journal. Seth Godin defines three kinds of blogs on his blog at (www.sethgodin.com):

1. News blogs... the idea is simple. An author (or authors) chronicles the events of the day. This can be commentary on politics or news or dieting sites or merely pointers to interesting technology introductions.
2. Authors' blogs... while they occasionally riff about today's news, are mostly an opportunity for the writer to engage in an extended monologue. The monologue is influenced by reader feedback and new happenings, so it's a lot more interactive than a book, but it certainly isn't a conversation.
3. Our blogs... the tip of the community iceberg. A posting on an 'our blog' is nothing but a firestarter, a chance to start the conversation and see what happens.

Blog (v) – to post something, or link to something, on your blog.

Blogger (n) – (1) One who blogs. (2) The blogging service bought by Google last year (www.blogger.com).

Post (v) – to add a segment, or post, to your blog.

Post (n) – a segment or message that someone has posted.

Blogosphere (n) – the blogging world.

RSS Feed (n) – RSS stands for "Really Simply Syndication", "Rich Site Summary" or "RDF Site Summary". Whatever definition works for you, it allows people to subscribe to a blog using an RSS reader.

RSS Reader (n) – a piece of software that lists each new post on a blog. It's like a cross between a web browser and email: like a web browser, you can organise your favourite blogs into folders; like email, the information comes to you, rather than you having to remember to visit the site.

Moblog, Photolog (n) – a blog created using a cellphone with a built-in camera.

Vblog (n) – an audio blog. Posts are spoken rather than written.

Starting A Blog?

It's definitely something you want to do if you have a young, tech-savvy, cynical audience. But tread carefully. These marketers and bloggers had some sage advice for would be bloggers:

1. Ask yourself why. Australian dm consultant Malcolm Auld warns against blogging simply because it's the thing to do. "Ask yourself, why do I want to write and manage a blog?" says Auld. "What is its purpose? What can a blog do that other marketing activity can't? How much can I afford to invest in a blog and do I have the resources to keep it current and linked to other blogs? How will I measure the effectiveness?"

2. Put an individual in charge. Blogs are made by people, not committees. Jon Ostler, technical director for online marketing company First Rate, recommends a blog belong to an individual rather than a company, with all postings made by that individual.

3. Converse. New Zealand's own permission marketing guru, Chris Price, says, "Blogs offer marketers a new type of voice in the market. Less formal than a corporate newsletter and more personal

than a website. The challenge then is for marketers to produce a blog 'conversation' that others will want to listen to."

4. Listen. Ben McConnell, co-author of the book "Creating Customer Evangelists", says a blog can humanise an organisation, removing the veneer of corporate indifference. "Better yet," he says, "a blog can help people inside organisations see customers as people with opinions and unsolved problems, not just as numbers on a spreadsheet."

5. Share, don't sell. Auld warns, "As most blogs are individual publications, marketers need to ensure they use their blog as a place to exchange information, not to sell the corporate mantra. If a marketer's blog content becomes too sales oriented, it won't survive."

6. Prepare for dissent. If your blog is any good at getting attention, sooner or later there will be a troublemaker. Decide beforehand what your policy will be, bearing in mind the openness and transparency expected of blogs. Will you look like the bad guy by censoring? Or will you risk letting anything on in the name of free press? (Blogging is, after all, publishing.) Auld warns not to let your blog

be hijacked by an individual or group who want to undermine your blog.

7. Start simple. Blogs are essentially simple. They don't need lavish design to make an impact; the focus is on the words. There are several free services available to start a blog, and many web content management packages include the capability to create a blog or discussion board.

Auld also suggests a lower-risk alternative to starting your own blog: "You can simply track blogs on topics of relevance and contribute where you feel necessary."

Taken further, this can lead to sponsorship or advertising deals, like Microsoft's sponsorship of technology blogs, Nike's co-branding effort with Art of Speed, and in New Zealand, the "Listener" and bFM's advertising on Russell Brown's Hard News blog.

Saatchi & Saatchi's interactive creative director Tom Eslinger says, "[Sponsorship] works when the idea of public postings/debate/dialogue works alongside the campaign or brand and the audience.

"I think I'm like most heavy media consumers and I'm sceptical of big brands jumping on things because they're so hot right now," adds Eslinger.

"It is obvious when the fit is forced."

ging is still in the midst of uncontrived innocence."

And that's the way it needs to be. As the reality programming analogy suggests, authenticity is essential – a lesson that beverage maker Dr Pepper/Seven Up learnt painfully with its Raging Cow blog.

In early 2003, Dr Pepper/Seven Up launched a "milk-based product with an attitude" called Raging Cow.

In an attempt to reach the hip young audience, who 7-Up correctly deduced

were turned off to traditional media, they set up a blog – run by a cow.

The blog told the story of the cow's transformation from placid dairy life to a crusader against boring milk.

It was set up as part of an overall campaign which included mainstream advertising, street posters, events and street sampling.

The campaign designers recognised that a message on a blog cannot be controlled, just released into the wild.

Their strategy was to recruit key influencers who also ran their own blogs.

Six teenage bloggers were recruited – unpaid, but plied with free product and promotional materials.

They weren't required to mention the product at all, and when they did they were free to say what they wanted about it.

With some, it went down well.

But other bloggers saw it differently. They saw it as an invasion of commercial interests into a non-commercial domain,

Blogs As Advertising Media

It's extremely early days, but at least one company is making money out of blog publishing or 'nanopublishing'.

Gawker Media, the brainchild of New Yorker Nick Denton, runs six blogs that cater for niche audiences.

Denton himself edits some while other professional bloggers edit others.

The medium combines the informality of a blog with targeted audience demographics and statistics for advertisers. It's publishing without the heavy overheads of print.

New Zealand's best-known blog, Russell Brown's Hard News, features advertising but Brown says he's not giving up his day job yet.

While he'd like to see more income from the site, Brown admits he's putting the audience – and not potential advertisers – first.

"I've deliberately decided against revenue opportunities that would ruin the site," says Brown.

"I'm talking about the super-size banners you see on high-traffic sites everywhere else. I'd rather convince potential advertisers of the merits of doing something more in keeping with the environment of the site."

Bloggers also can be key influencers in their target groups.

"I don't think a lot of marketing people yet appreciate what we are and the audience we offer," says Brown. "[These people] are high-income, highly qualified and very big on internet use."

and called for a boycott of the products.

Google "Raging Cow" (that's the verb Google, not the noun) and you'll find a range of views on the campaign.

It is presented in many ways as a failure of marketing blogs.

But failure or not, the cow issue does highlight the importance of authenticity.

Authenticity is by no means needed just for blogs; it's now essential for all forms of marketing.

It's just that, by their very personal nature, blogs accentuate the need for authenticity.

This should be nothing new to marketers. "The Cluetrain Manifesto" presented 95 theses on the future of marketing.

Unlike Martin Luther's 95 theses, nobody lost their lives over these ones.

But one has to wonder if marketers are slowly, imperceptibly dying by neglecting principles like these:

1. Markets are conversations.
2. Markets consist of human beings, not demographic sectors.
3. Conversations among human beings

“Control in the age of relationships is futile.”

sound human. They are conducted in a human voice.

4. Whether delivering information, opinions, perspectives, dissenting arguments or humorous asides, the human voice is typically open, natural, uncontrived.

5. People recognise each other as such from the sound of this voice.

6. The internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media... ”

... and so on, for 95 points. Commonsense stuff, but stuff that doesn't catch on easily when marketers are used to a long history of safe, controlled monologue.

Uncontrolled dialogue is valuable, necessary even, but also very risky.

Eslinger warns, “The best blogs are not censored and the anarchic nature of posting is what we enjoy about them.

This goes against the way most brands would behave.”

McConnell warns marketers to beware of blogs becoming primarily a branding exercise.

“Blogs are about sharing knowledge and encouraging discussions,” he says, “not just functioning as a broadcaster of your brand's importance.

“I've heard some people complain they can't monetize their blog. That's a short-sighted approach; a blog is more like investing in R&D with customers and prospects.”

That's where the real opportunities lie in blogging – not so much in getting your message across but in building dialogue with customers.

Microsoft lets 800 of its developers loose with their own personal blogs. They're told what they can't give away – commercially sensitive information – but apart from that, they're left on their own to build relationships.

It's a way – some suggest the only way – to reach cynical people in the tech in-

dustry. It's a great example of a much-maligned and distrusted brand using blogs to demonstrate openness and, perhaps most importantly, a willingness to listen.

McConnell sees great value in opening up direct dialogue between customers and those responsible for making products.

“Marketers would do well to encourage a company's product development leaders, customer service managers or ceos to start blogging.

“Encourage conversations. Create more transparency.

“Give up message control, for control in the age of relationships is futile.”

The monologue has finished. The conversation has started.

If you're not taking part in the conversation, your customers will simply find someone else who will listen. ■■

Simon Young blogs about what makes a leader at <http://leadershipissues.blogspot.com>. It started off as a 'writer's blog' but is quickly becoming an 'our blog', with five contributors from around the world. simon@simonyoungwriters.com