

Blogging

In this chapter you will learn about:

- © Blogging and common elements of a blog site
- © The growth of blogging
- © Types of blogs and how they differ from each other
- © The demographics of the blogging community and why people blog
- © The benefits and potential pitfalls of using blogging as part of a marketing plan and the requirements for a successful marketing blog

The continuous exchange of ideas and opinions facilitated by the social media revolution has turned the Web into a massive, global conversation. In that conversation, blogs are the voice box. In rapidly growing numbers, Web users the world over are turning to blogs to publish their own content and explore the ideas and beliefs of others. Through this dialogue, the social aspect of the Web continues to expand.

What Is Blogging?

As you learned in Chapter 1, blogging is the online equivalent of writing down news, thoughts, and daily events in a physical journal. Unlike traditional journals, which are typically private, however, blogs are usually very public. Blogs present entries in chronological order (with the most current appearing at the top of the blog page) and allow people to comment on each entry. Moreover, blogs tend to be focused on a particular topic and maintain a theme that ties all of the entries together.

It is important to understand that the word “blog” can be used three different ways:

- As a noun to describe a Web site or an application within a Web site where entries can be made by the owner of that particular site or profile
- As a noun to describe a single entry made onto a blog site or application
- As a verb to describe the act of writing and adding content to a blog site or application

Blogs encourage social networking by inviting people in open, public forums to read postings and contribute their own ideas to the subject at hand. On particularly popular blogs, readers often comment on specific blog entries as well as other readers’ comments. These online exchanges spark longer and broader discussions by people spanning global boundaries and demographic categories. Figure 4-1 shows a few pages from a typical blog site.

While the vast majority of blogs are strictly text-based, blogs can include images, video clips, audio files, downloadable reports, presentations, etc. Most blog sites contain many of the following elements:

- The blog title
- The name of the **blog editor** (the author of the blog) and sometimes a link to their bio
- The posting headline and date posted
- The posting itself
- Comments left by readers

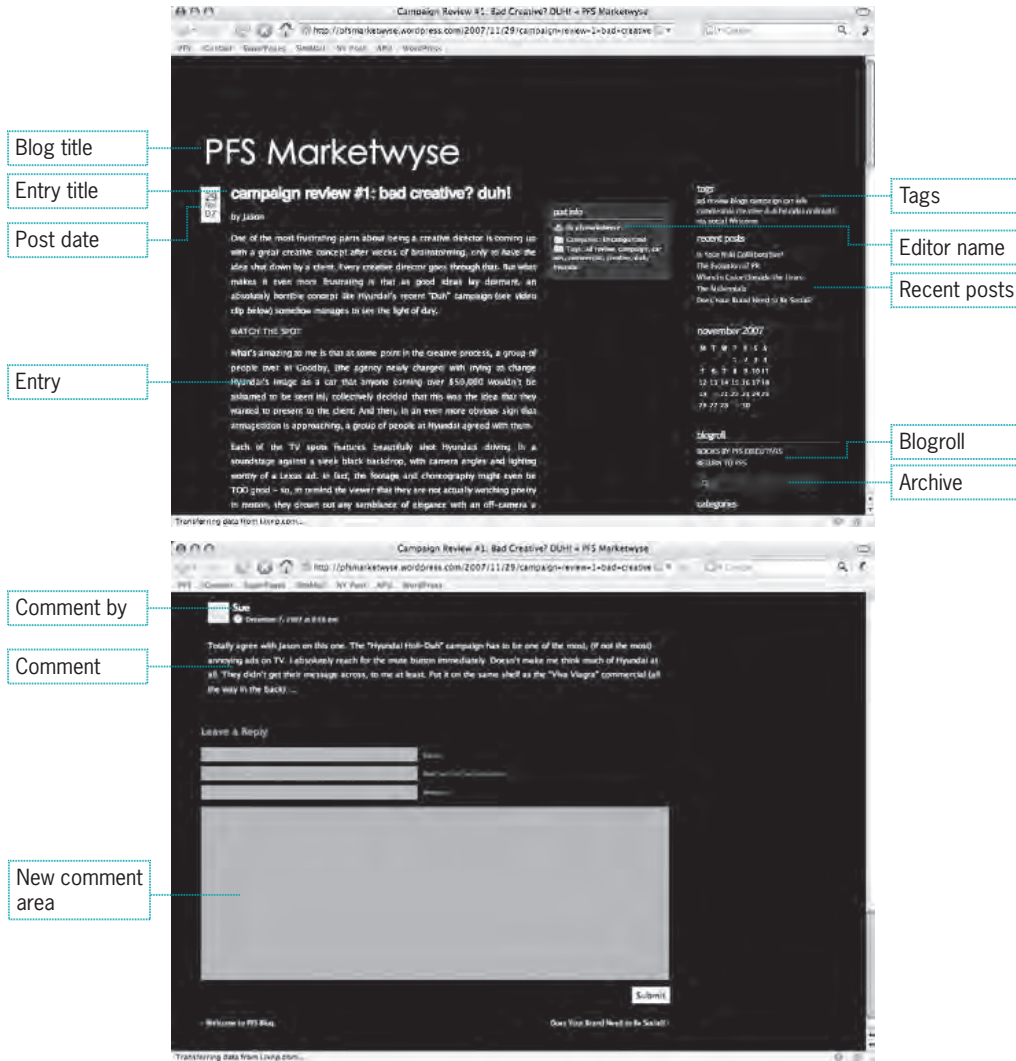


Figure 4-1 A typical blog site (from PFS Marketwyse, a marketing communications agency), with the key elements labeled.

- A response section for people who wish to log in and leave a new comment. The ability to subscribe to the blog (see information on RSS in Chapter 6)
- Access to archived entries
- A **blogroll** (a list of links to other blog sites that the editor thinks warrant attention)
- Links to related Web pages
- Tags for each entry; tags are keywords that describe the subject matter so that the blog can be found more easily in a Web search

The Growth of Blogs

The importance of blogging and its contribution to the growth of the social Internet can't be ignored. The **blogosphere** (the immense network of blogs on the Web) continues to grow. According to Technorati, an online resource that keeps track of the blogosphere, by December 2007 there were over 112 million blogs in existence, with over 120,000 new blogs created every day. That's almost 1.5 new blogs every second. In addition, 1.5 million new blog entries are made every day—17 posts every second.¹ That is remarkable growth from just four years earlier when the number of blogs was barely a blip on the chart. Figure 4-2 provides a chart outlining the growth rate of blogs over a four-year period starting in 2003.

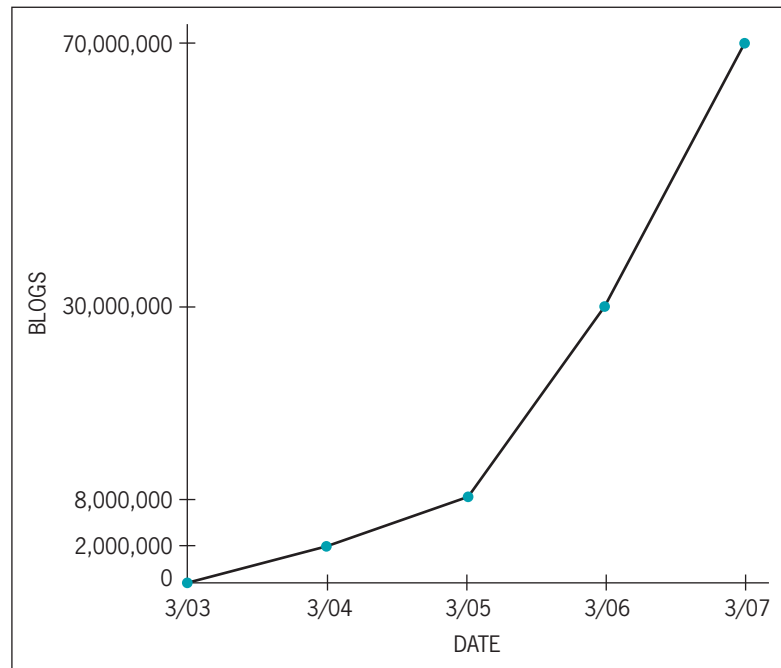


Figure 4-2 Blog growth chart from March 2003 to March 2007. SOURCE: "State of the Blogosphere." Technorati <www.technorati.com>, Aug. 2008.

Beyond the sheer numbers is a more striking statistic that reflects the trust being placed in blogs as a resource for news and information. In a list compiled by Technorati of the top 100 most visited online news sources in the fourth quarter of 2006—a list that includes such widely respected news sources as *The New York Times* and CNN—22 sites were blogs.² That's up from 12 just three months earlier. However, as more mass media news sources allow readers to

comment on stories and repost them to social networking and bookmarking sites, people are less able to distinguish a media site from a blog site. This is an example of the increasing convergence of all social media tools, which are coming together to create a more unified and integrated Web experience. If the early Web brought people together by links, today's social Web brings them together by content and contribution.

Types of Blogs

Just as a variety of social networking sites exist on the Web, a wide range of blog types also dot the Web. The content of each blog is dictated by the author who is writing it and the market that he or she seeks to reach. All of these types of blogs intertwine within the blogosphere to give readers a nearly limitless amount of content for virtually every possible interest:

- **Personal blogs:** Personal blogs are kept by individuals looking to record the happenings of their everyday life, thoughts on current events, etc. These serve as personal journals. Very often the blogger doesn't expect mass amounts of traffic but rather maintains the blog for his or her personal benefit and for the enjoyment of close friends and family. These blogs can include travel highlights, family updates, "state-of-life" postings, or musings on a variety of topics of interest to the blogger.

INTERVIEW WITH...

VICTORIA RENTZ

As blogs have sprung up across the Web, readers have begun to pick out their favorites based on topic, blog content, and writing style. Victoria Rentz writes and maintains a popular personal blog called Best Dates Now (see Figure 4-3), chronicling her adventures in dating. Victoria took some time from her busy social life to talk to me about her blog.

JASON: Why did you start writing the blog, and what inspired you?

VICTORIA: I'd been participating in a ton (too many, probably) of online dating sites and singles activities in New York City for about a year when I decided to start the blog. Because I'm on so many e-mail lists, I receive discount event coupons fairly frequently. I figured it might be helpful for others looking for similar activities to access these discount codes, and read reviews of the different dating events and sites I'd tried, and my experiences on them. Then I read about

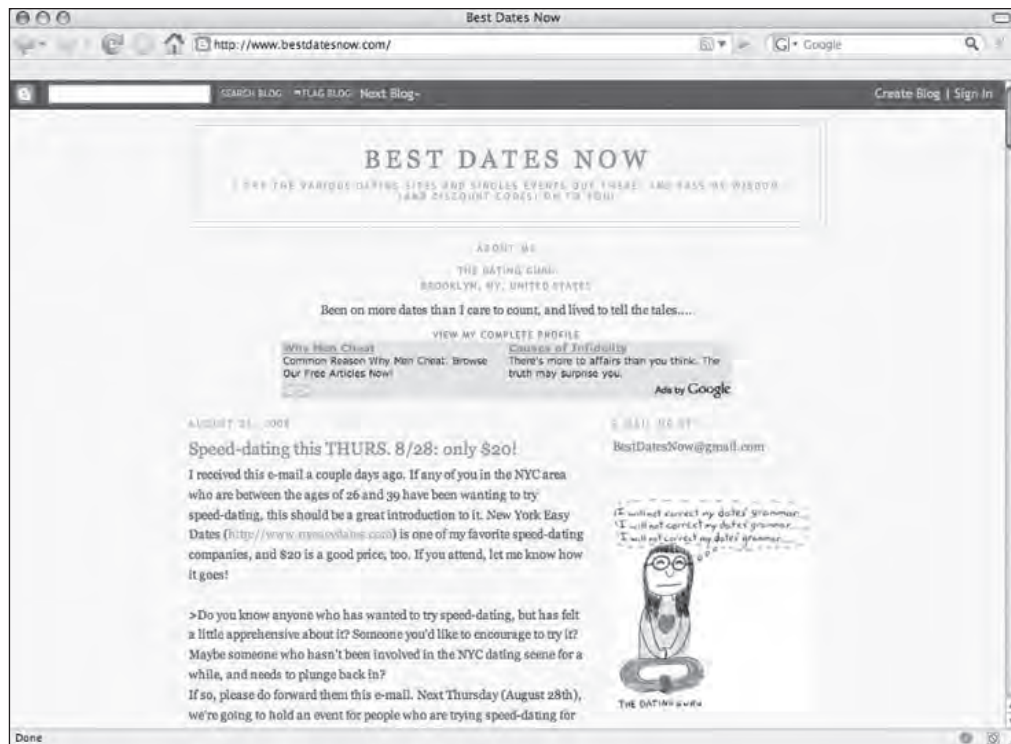


Figure 4-3 ‘Best Dates Now’, a personal blog by Victoria Rentz, profiling her online dating life.

a guy who made a lot of money each month by posting ads on his blog about cheap places to eat lunch in mid-town New York. I started my blog the following week.

JASON: What type of people are you trying to attract?

VICTORIA: Anyone who is single and looking to meet people. The events end up being pretty New York-centered, since that’s where I happen to live. I try to mix it up as much as I can among reviews and discount codes of NYC events, national online dating sites, and humorous/horrendous (sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference) personal tales of my own dating experiences. But surprisingly, people leave comments from all over the country. I guess people can have memorable dating experiences anywhere!

JASON: What do you hope to get out of writing it?

VICTORIA: Fame and fortune, of course! I’m just kidding. I do make a little money from the ads that are on the blog, but the real reason I do it is that I love to write. So if I can entertain people while giving them a way to access dating sites and events more inexpensively,

then I'm pretty happy. It's a creative outlet for me. It makes the bad dates not so bad, because they serve a purpose as part of my blog, and it makes the good dates more exciting because I get to relive them in my writing. And who knows? It could eventually lead to more lucrative writing gigs in the future, and if it does, so much the better.

JASON: What have been the reactions from readers? Has it been hard to build an audience?

VICTORIA: I've received some funny and interesting comments on the blog itself. People have also told me directly that they enjoy reading it. At first most of the comments were from friends or people related to me, but over time I've started getting a dedicated and growing base of readers that look forward to each new entry. It takes time to build up an audience. I know other people that start a blog, and when nobody comes to read it, they get discouraged and give up on it. But there are a lot of blogs out there for people to read. It takes time and patience and persistence before people will find your blog and come back regularly. And of course, writing it is only half the effort. The other half is publicizing it, like getting onto other bloggers' blog-rolls, including new posts in aggregate sites like Digg, tagging every new post appropriately, or just regularly e-mailing everyone I know when I put something new up.

As far as the comments go, once in a while I'll get someone who leaves an unpleasant comment, but when you run a public blog you have to expect that that's going to happen and have a thick skin about it. Mostly, though, the comments are all from people who have found themselves in the exact same position I've written about, and can empathize with my dating adventures. I think people like knowing that they aren't alone, that someone else "gets" them, and that they have an outlet to share their own stories or at least say "Hey, that happened to me, too!"

JASON: How often do you update your blog?

VICTORIA: I could probably attract a larger audience if I posted new content every day. But I'm an old-fashioned story-writer by nature, and since some of my entries are pretty long (sometimes closing in on 2,000 words, for instance), I've been posting new entries three or four days a week. If I were doing this for business purposes, or really to gain a lot of exposure, I'd write shorter blogs and post them more often. But I need to write my blogs in the way that I'm most comfortable with, because at the end of the day, my blog is my venue for self expression before anything else.

- **Media blogs:** Media blogs are like the op-ed columns of major newspapers or media outlets. Many journalists and columnists maintain blogs on mainstream media outlet Web sites (or they may maintain a separate personal blog site), offering their own thoughts and opinions on the news being reported. As noted earlier, many online mass media outlets allow readers to leave their comments directly on a news article itself, and the lines between what is news site and what is a blog are gradually blurring.
- **Business blogs:** Increasingly, businesses are maintaining blogs of their own, offering their insight and advice on the issues of interest to their customers. These blogs can help drive traffic to a company's Web site and establish the organization as an industry expert. While non-business blogs are usually an open forum for both positive and negative reader comments, businesses often police their blogs very strictly, deleting negative postings about their brand. This in turn puts the authenticity of positive comments in doubt, and can limit the effectiveness of the blog.
- **Vlogs:** Vlogs are video-based blogs in which the blog entry is provided in a video format as opposed to a text-based entry.
- **Blog search engines:** Blog search engines aren't blogs (although most contain blogs within them). Their main purpose is to help blog readers navigate the blogosphere in search of particular content by tracking a variety of blogs. The sites typically categorize blogs by subject type and highlight blogs and entries that are getting particular attention. The home page for Technorati, one of the more popular blog search engines, is shown in Figure 4-4.
- **Microblogs: Microblogs** are blogs made up of very short entries, often just a line or two to let friends, family, or coworkers get a quick glimpse of what the blogger is doing or thinking about. While standard blog entries can be long, like a journal entry or report, a microblog is purposely short, sweet, and to the point. Figure 4-5 shows a profile page on Twitter—a microblog site where users can write quick updates about what they are up to, and other users can sign up to keep track of their actions.

The screenshot shows the Technorati website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Front Page', 'Business', 'Entertainment', 'Lifestyle', 'Politics', 'Sports', 'Technology', 'Travel', 'Photos', 'Videos', and 'Blogger Central'. Below this is a search bar and a 'Share what you think' button. The main content area is titled 'Front page / what's percolating in blogs now'. It features several columns of blog posts, each with a title, a brief excerpt, and a 'Read more' link. The posts are categorized into sections like 'Rising blog posts by attention', 'Rising news stories by attention', 'More rising blog posts', and 'More rising news stories'. A sidebar on the right contains 'Today in Photos', 'Tape from what's rising', and 'Contributing bloggers'. The footer includes copyright information for Technorati, Inc. and links to 'About Us' and 'Advertise'.

Figure 4-4 Technorati is a popular search engine that scours the blogosphere for blog content. The Technorati Home page lists popular blogs arranged by topic categories such as business, politics, sports, etc.



Figure 4-5 A profile page on the microblogging site, Twitter. Notice each blog entry (down the center of the page) is only a line or two—quick thoughts and updates. The thumbnails on the right side are other Twitter users who follow this microblog.

- **Flogs:** **Flogs**, or “fake blogs,” are usually set up as marketing gimmicks to help promote a company or support an ad campaign.
- **Paid blogs:** Not exactly the worst sinners in the blogosphere (see next entry: splogs), paid bloggers post blog entries talking up brands and companies that sponsor them. Although these blogs may appear to contain only personal opinions, positive product mentions in these blog entries are actually paid endorsements from companies. Very often, **paid blogs** are established by sites that act as middlemen, connecting marketers with bloggers wanting to get paid for their writing. Fortunately, a very low percentage of bloggers engage in this practice, as it has the potential of undermining the honesty on which blogging is based.
- **Splogs:** The term “**splog**” is a blending of the words “spam” and “blog.” Sploggers don’t actually post any real content of their own. Instead,

they open a blog site focused on a specific topic, grab headlines (called **scrapping**) from legitimate news sources, and publish those headlines on their site as actual blog posts. Much of this can be done automatically, with little hands-on work by the splogger. They then drive traffic to their splog by syndicating (publishing and distributing) it onto popular blog search engines. The sploggers usually fill the non-content area with pay-per-click ads, earning a few cents each time a person clicks on one of those ads. Splogs are frustrating for blog readers, who get fooled into thinking they are finding original source material rather than republished headlines designed only to bring in advertising revenue. An example of a splog is shown in Figure 4-6.



Figure 4-6 A typical splog's entries are just standard news headlines from around the Web. A splogger uses blog search engines and other means to drive traffic to their blog and makes money when people click on the paid ad links within the site.

Splogs are often confused with another annoyance, known as “spam in blogs,” which are random comments left on legitimate blogs. The spam includes links to other sites, usually selling fake watches, counterfeit pharmaceuticals, or other scams.

Who Blogs, Who Reads Them, How, and Why

If the explosive popularity of blogs has shown us one thing, it is that people are hungry for information and anxious for an opportunity to express themselves. In fact, 54% of all bloggers have never been published elsewhere,³ indicating that these people have had the willingness and desire to express themselves but lacked an appropriate outlet.

As with other areas of social media, blogs are dominated by younger Web users. Slightly over half of all bloggers are under the age of 30, with a fairly even divide between male and female.⁴ Table 4-1 shows a number of popular reasons why people choose to blog.

Reason People Blog	Major Reason	Minor Reason	Not a Reason
Creative expression	52%	25%	23%
Document and share personal experiences	50%	26%	24%
Stay in touch with friends and family	37%	22%	40%
Share knowledge or skills with others	34%	30%	35%
Motivate others to action	29%	32%	38%
Entertain people	28%	33%	39%
Store important information	28%	21%	52%
Influence the opinions of others	27%	24%	49%
Network and meet new people	16%	34%	50%
Generate direct income	7%	8%	85%

Table 4-1 Table detailing the reasons why people blog. SOURCE: Lenhart, Amanda, et al. “Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet’s New Storytellers.” Pew Internet & American Life Project, 19 Jul. 2006.

Bloggers are also proving to be a demographic all their own, as their behavior can vary substantially from other Internet users. Table 4-2 provides a table outlining some of the differences between the way that bloggers use the Web as compared to the Internet population as a whole.

Actions Taken	Bloggers	All Internet Users
Get news from the Internet	95%	73%
Share personal artwork, photos stories, or videos online	77%	26%
Go online for news and info on politics	72%	58%
Go online several times a day from home	64%	27%
Get news from e-mail newsletters	55%	29%
Get news from a blog	47%	9%

Table 4-2 Bloggers tend to act differently from all Internet users as a whole. SOURCE: Lenhart, Amanda, et al. “Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet’s New Storytellers.” Pew Internet & American Life Project, 19 Jul. 2006.

With 95% of all bloggers looking online for news, and 47% of bloggers getting news from the blogosphere itself, it should come as no surprise that blogging goes hand-in-hand with current events.⁵

Bloggers are more apt to post during times when significant national and world events are taking place. The bar chart in Figure 4-7 shows some of the spikes in daily blog posts that coincided with important or well-publicized events between August 2004 and February 2007.

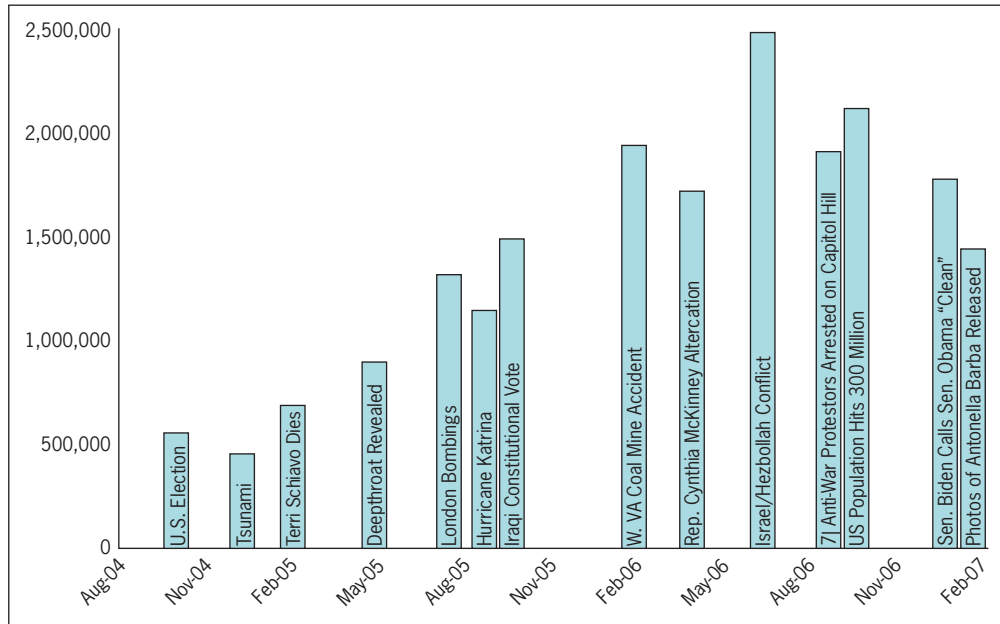


Figure 4-7 The number of blog entries typically spikes during important news and current events.
SOURCE: Technorati <www.technorati.com> Aug. 2007

Most bloggers don't view their own blogs as journalistic endeavors, but rather as personal pursuits, which is an especially interesting point of view given the very public nature of blogging and the increasing convergence of blogs and mass media. While only a third of bloggers consider their blogs a form of journalism, nearly two thirds spend time verifying facts, citing references and including external links to source information—actions typically associated with journalists. Table 4-3 breaks down the frequency with which bloggers take actions that would be considered over and above the call of duty for a private journal entry and that begin to overlap with methods used by traditional journalists.

Blogs have gained popularity in part as a response to concerns with the news coverage provided by traditional media outlet. According to a February 2008 poll by Zogby International (a leading polling and market research firm), nearly 70% of the U.S. public view traditional

Actions Taken	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	N/A
Verify facts	35%	21%	14%	28%	2%
Add direct quotes	15%	25%	13%	41%	5%
Get copyright permission	12%	8%	11%	50%	17%
Include links to source information	35%	22%	14%	27%	2%
Post corrections	11%	27%	21%	38%	2%

Table 4-3 Even though a full third of bloggers don't consider their work to be a form of journalism, this table shows that very often, bloggers use methods that are employed by professional journalists. SOURCE: Lenhart, Amanda, et al. "Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers." Pew Internet & American Life Project, 19 Jul. 2006.

journalism as out of touch with what most American want from their news.⁶ When you compare this to Pew's finding that nearly half of the Internet population is hungry for unbiased news, it is easy to see an opening for a new media to gain traction.⁷

The impression that major news sources such as CNN and MSN present news with a liberal slant and others such as Fox News have a more conservative bent is fueled by the blogosphere. As a result, even more people have begun to seek out news from blogs or generate their own content. Marketers need to recognize the consequences of this trend. Blog-reported information (both good and bad) regarding their products and services might easily be taken as fact or at least be given more credibility than it merits.

Bloggging as a Marketing Strategy

While blogs have inspired millions of individuals to tap into their inner writer, blogs offer far more than simply a personal creative outlet. For businesses, blogs offer an opportunity to reach new and larger audiences in a unique way.

Businesses are drawn to blogs because of their accessibility. Blogs are inexpensive, and they are easy to get started. Programs and sites that enable the creation and publication of blogs are available from a variety of popular sources for free. Practically no programming skill is required to start a blog. Would-be bloggers simply sign-up with the selected blog provider, such as WordPress or Blogger, choose and customize the page design, and launch their blog. Once started, maintaining the blog is also simple, as adding content typically requires little more than writing the copy and pushing a "submit" button.

These are important features, especially for smaller companies that often don't have the resources or technical knowledge required for

Web marketing. For them, blogging provides an inexpensive way to get their name and message out to prospective audiences.

The Benefits of Blogging

For all companies, blogging provides opportunities that other on- and offline marketing tools do not. The following sections discuss some of the benefits of blogging for marketers.

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Easy Provision of Information

Updating a blog does not require a highly coordinated effort. In fact, the only real time commitment is the time it takes to create the content. Compared to other forms of marketing communication such as print ads or brochures, which need to go through significant quality control checks, blogging is a relatively uncomplicated form of wide-scale communications.

Establishing a More Human Voice

Most companies speak to their audience through a variety of marketing materials, ranging from brochures, sale sheets, and corporate Web sites to radio and television ads. These vehicles are each unique, but they are all designed to deliver a specific message in marketing language that is carefully crafted but hardly conversational. Corporate blogs, however, give companies an opportunity to break away from traditional marketing language and speak to consumers directly, using a more informal tone. This helps to humanize the brand, making it easier to forge an emotional connection with the audience. Corporate blogs still need to maintain some semblance of their brand voice, but blogging provides significantly more room for relaxed communication than almost any other method of marketing.

Increased Credibility

Because corporate blogs give marketers the opportunity to support their products while allowing reader feedback, blogs can increase a brand's credibility with its audience. If misused, however, blogs can just as easily damage the brand, and reduce its credibility. This credibility doesn't just come from blog posts that hail the benefits of the company's products or services—in fact, just the opposite. Product and service claims made in ads are traditionally met with a degree of skepticism by the market, because they are viewed to have a single purpose: to sell. A blog, however, gives the marketer the opportunity to communicate with the market with a different purpose in mind: rather than to sell, their goal is to inform. This may come by blog

posts that establish the author (a representative of a given company) as a thought leader or expert in a given field, in turn gaining reader trust and credibility with consumers.

Marketing Campaign Support

Large-scale marketing campaigns that use a variety of media outlets are typically centered on a unifying theme and promote a message from the brand to its audience. Often, large campaigns incorporate an online component that includes a campaign-based Web site (outside of a brand's standard, corporate Web site). The addition of a blog lets the brand further promote the campaign, explain the concept behind it, and involve the audience in the campaign by soliciting reader opinions.

Character blogs are one method of using blog technology to support a marketing program or increase the visibility of a brand. With character blogs, each entry is written from the perspective of a fictional character. Suppose, for example, that DC Comics developed a character blog in which Batman (one of their characters) described what was going on in Gotham City—new villains, politicians coming into office, current city happenings—letting readers really get into his head and leave comments on his entries. Obviously, readers would be aware that the blog entries are fictitious. After all, Batman is a fictional character and Gotham isn't a real city. However, that kind of blog could maintain the back story, build anticipation between movies, or help sell more comic books. These types of blogs are entertaining, and help promote a larger storyline. Figure 4-8 shows a blog kept by the “Banker,” a fictional, shadowy, and brash character featured on the popular game show *Deal or No Deal*. His blog entries, each of which may get hundreds of responses, are blunt. They are written in such a way as to antagonize readers and establish the Banker as the villain in the show.

Improved Customer Service

Customer service is central to any company that needs to maintain long-term relationships with their customers. Because it is also an expensive endeavor that doesn't translate directly into increased revenue, many companies see customer service programs as a necessary evil. Because of this, some companies do what they can to decrease the cost of customer service, which can result in poor quality and unhappy customers. Blogs are an inexpensive and effective way for companies to improve their customer service. Blogs allow businesses to proactively tackle issues they know will be problematic and give customers a forum to ask questions that brand representatives can discuss in a public setting.



Figure 4-8 The Web site for the popular game show Deal or No Deal features a blog by the irascible Banker, a shadowy character who is the villain of the show. His blog is written in a snide, obnoxious voice, further developing his character and helping draw more people into the show.

Opportunities to Draw a New Audience

By promoting a blog through traditional marketing, tags, and listings in blog search engines, corporations can draw audiences they might not otherwise be able to attract. Blogs often include links to other company Web pages to drive traffic to specific areas of the main site for more information or to other pages where products can be purchased.

Improved Internal Communications

Although blogs are typically open to the general public, they don't have to be. Companies with a large number of employees or those with employees spread over a wide geographic range can improve communications by instituting an internal blog. These blogs can be used in a variety of ways, including as a digital "suggestion box," allowing employees to voice their opinions on how to improve the company. Blogs can also serve as a forum for key executives to update employees on company news and information that can help keep employees more closely tied to the company and improve productivity.

The Benefits of Staying Involved in the Blogosphere

Maintaining a blog is not the only way that a company can benefit from the blogging phenomenon. Marketers can also reap enormous benefits by paying close attention to other industry blogs and by actively posting to an assortment of blogs in their corner of the blogosphere. There is a wide variety of advantages to this active involvement in the blogosphere, including sensing the pulse of the market, increased visibility, and increased Web site and blog traffic.

Sensing the Pulse of the Market

The blogosphere is an ideal setting for gathering information on the market a company is trying to reach. Studying a variety of blogs and the comments left by readers can give marketers a keen sense of what's popular and what isn't, what trends are ending and which are developing, and how the market may or may not be adapting to changes in the industry. In addition, brands can get direct information about how people feel about their own products as well the competition. This knowledge allows marketers to be proactive in their efforts to introduce new products and effectively market existing products to their target audience.

Increased Visibility

Savvy marketers will also post comments on other blogs, where appropriate, to provide their brand's viewpoint on the subject matter at hand. This is a more subtle approach to spreading the brand name; however, building a voice in the blogosphere through comments on existing blogs does help to increase the visibility of the brand. There is a big difference between leaving comments and opinions on a blog from your brand's viewpoint (which people will accept and appreciate) and using someone else's blog to leave a blatant sales pitch or advertisement (which people will resent and which can slowly but surely damage your brand).

Increased Web Site and Blog Traffic

Playing an active role in the blogosphere can also help drive traffic to the brand's corporate site and blog. On most blogs, people who post comments can also include links to their own sites or other relevant Web pages. Therefore, marketers who make their voice heard via comments on other blogs can also expect to drive additional traffic to their own sites and blogs.

The Pitfalls of Blogging

While blogging can be a boon for companies in their marketing efforts, it also presents significant danger if not handled properly. As we'll learn later in this book, one of the keys to building a solid relationship with consumers is to gain their trust that the site in question and the company behind it means what they say, presents themselves well, is well organized and reflects the values and knowledge required by the market. Any missteps in these area can be potentially harmful and, if egregious enough, irreversible.

Lying

People see blogs as an honest expression of opinions and experience. They may vehemently disagree with the opinions that a blog editor expresses and will say so in comments, but at the very least, they believe those opinions are honest.

Marketers, however, sometimes create fake blogs in support of their campaign efforts. Flogs are established to trick people into believing that the opinions and stories they are reading are true, when in fact the postings are purely marketing-driven content written for the sole purpose of promoting a brand and its products. This can backfire dramatically, as blog readers do not like to be fooled and will hold the brand accountable for lying. Very often, if the brand that is perpetrating the deception is big enough, they can be persecuted in the media. The blogosphere will spread the word throughout the Web, potentially harming the brand image. The practice of creating a marketing campaign that leads the audience to believe it is something other than a marketing promotion is called **false transparency**.

Earlier in this section, we discussed character blogs, in which a blog is created and maintained on behalf of a fictional character, such as the *Deal or No Deal* Banker's blog. Some people think that character blogs are the equivalent of outright lying. After all, these characters don't exist in real life, so the content can't be true, right? It is a fine line, but two characteristics of character blogs make them less objectionable to most people.

The first characteristic is transparency. The transparency in the case of character blogs is not false. Nobody really believes that the Banker, Batman, Bart Simpson, or the Trix cereal rabbit are real. Blog readers visit these sites with the understanding that these blogs are there for both entertainment and marketing purposes. By reading and commenting, they are willing participants in the character and storyline. The second aspect of character blogs that makes them more acceptable is the nature of the blog entries. The postings on these blogs are

true, from the perspective of that character. Darth Vader's blog about his frustrations with those pesky rebels would be made up of honest entries from his point of view. In these cases, blogs work to make the characters more real, and give them dimension, which is called good character development—not lying.

Substandard Execution

As with any marketing program, corporate blogs must be maintained and carefully crafted in order to build and keep an audience. Marketers need to pay close attention to the execution and development of the blogs. Companies can do themselves considerable harm by not fully executing their blogging efforts. Some potentially damaging practices include:

- Publishing a blog that is rarely or randomly updated. When a visitor comes to a blog only to see that the last entry was weeks or months ago, he or she will get the impression that nothing important is going on in the company. Obviously, no company would intentionally create such a negative impression.
- Poorly policing the blog and allowing comments to remain that are really just spam. Too many spam-generated comments will drive real readers away from the blog and reflect poorly on the brand, which can be seen as sloppy and disorganized.
- Posting poorly developed content that runs counter to the beliefs, promises, and personality of the brand, ultimately confusing readers as to what the brand is really about.

As mentioned earlier, corporate blogging is a commitment. Even though it is an easy and cost-effective type of program, blogs can be a digital lightning rod for audiences, and companies need to pay considerable attention to ensure that these audiences are fed information properly.

Longevity

Although specific entries can be deleted from a blog and blog sites can be shut down entirely, a simple copy-and-paste by a single blog reader can keep a controversial or damaging blog entry alive and in the blogosphere forever. Like a politician running for office, every brand has its enemies, looking for an opportunity to tarnish its image. Marketers should be sure that each entry they post will position their brand in a positive light, in both the short and long term, because very often, there simply isn't any going back to erase old mistakes.

Representation

Whoever does the writing for a corporate brand becomes the voice of that brand. Any opinions expressed by that representative will be seen by readers as the official position of the brand. A single misstep or a poorly worded blog entry can do untold damage to a brand.

Employees often host their own blogs outside of the office. Individuals may keep these blogs for personal reasons, but if the employees reveal where they work, they might be seen as a representative of that brand. Because of that, their blog entries could reflect on their employer. Companies that understand the power of blogs often set policies that limit the type of information that their employees can publish on their blogs, even during off hours.

Requirements for a Successful Marketing Blog

Companies that incorporate blogging into their marketing strategy need to make it a commitment, and consider six requirements in order to make their blogs successful: update content regularly, maintain a friendly but brand-oriented voice, keep content relevant, avoid ghost-writing posts, don't sell, and don't be too quick to delete.

Update Content Regularly

Once a company decides to maintain and promote a blog, it must make a commitment to keep the blog updated with new entries. The frequency of new entries is partially determined by the amount of traffic that comes to the site—the more traffic that visits, the more new entries should be posted. At the very least, new content needs to be added on a scheduled basis, so that readers know when to expect it. Posting entries on a seemingly random basis or missing scheduled updates is a sure way to lose core visitors who can easily become confused or indifferent, taking their blog-reading elsewhere.

Maintain a Friendly but Brand-Oriented Voice

Blogs offer companies the opportunity to communicate in a friendlier, more conversational tone. Marketers need to take care not to let this more casual style dilute the image and lifestyle that the brand represents. A tone of voice so informal that it runs contrary to the brand image can actually work against the company, detract from other marketing efforts, and drive away customers. For example, a blog set up by a luxury brand, such as Lexus, would benefit from being relaxed and intellectual, but would likely injure the brand if it included a lot of slang and inappropriate language. Successful

marketing is about having control over the message. Blogging, with its conversational style and open forum for responses, can reduce the control a marketer has over the message, so extra attention needs to be paid to ensure that the blog is friendly but still brand-oriented.

Keep Content Relevant

For the most part, blogs are based on a central theme as determined by the blog editor. This makes it easier for readers to find the blogs that they are most interested in. Readers also develop an expectation of what type of entries they will see on a particular blog in the future. Corporate blogs are no different. Editors should be aware that readers will come to their blog because they are interested or curious about that particular brand or the industry in general. It is important for marketers to remain on topic and not deviate from the stated focus of the blog. This reassures blog visitors that they will find information relevant to the interest that drew them to the blog in the first place.

Don't Ghost-Write Blog Posts

While the content of a blog is important, so is the name behind the blog. Many people tune into a particular TV news network because they trust the news anchor. Likewise, the validity of a blog post will often rest on the shoulders of its author. It's not uncommon for readers to examine the blog author's biography. Therefore, it's important that if the author of the blog is listed as the CEO of a company, the CEO should be the one writing the blog - not his or her speech writer or public relations agency. Blogs by definition are meant to be more personal and intimate. Once readers (or worse, the media) catch on to the fact that a blog is being ghost-written, there can be a severe backlash, causing audiences to question any future statements or claims by that company.

Don't Sell

Blogs are meant to provide insight and opinion, personal thoughts, experiences, or expert advice that other people can benefit from. They are not meant to be straightforward sales pitches, which are best left for advertisements or the content on a company's primary Web site. Clearly, a blog on a company's site is meant to help increase sales (the blog provides expert insight on some industry-related topic, the reader makes the mental connection that the blogger is associated with that company, and that company is seen in a positive light, which in turn may lead to increased sales). Blogging can work in a company's favor as long as this subtle connection is allowed to unfold, and the direct sales route is avoided.

Don't Be Too Quick to Delete

Because blogs are meant to be a public forum where readers can comment on each post, it is important that bloggers allow negative as well as positive posts. While it's fine to delete rude and baseless attacks or spam-tinged comments, marketers have to be careful not to delete comments simply because they offer a dissenting opinion. Consumers want to judge the quality of the content themselves. They will put more trust in a company that presents all of the ideas available—including ones that work counter to the company's goal—than they will into a company that “stacks the deck” and only provides the comments it wants readers to see.

Chapter Summary

- Blogging is a method of maintaining an online journal where entries are listed chronologically, with the most recent entry appearing at the top. Blogs encourage social networking by inviting people to read postings and contribute their own ideas to the subject at hand. The blog title, the name of the blog editor, individual blog postings, and comments by readers are some of the common elements of a blog site.
- The importance of blogging and its contribution to the growth of the social Internet can't be ignored. Blogging has gained significant popularity over the past several years, and more people are turning to blogs as a primary source of information.
- Many different types of blog sites are present on the Web, including those for personal, media, and marketing purposes, as well as fake blogs and blogs set up by spammers to try and generate click-through ad revenue.
- Blogs are dominated by authors under the age of 30, with a fairly even divide between male and female. For the most part, bloggers write for their own creative expression, although an increase in blogging often coincides with major world news. Some bloggers are using approaches to research and writing that are similar to those used by professional journalists.
- When done correctly, blogging can be an effective tool for brands as a part of their marketing program, proving helpful in customer service, campaign support and increasing Web traffic and overall credibility. The blogosphere is an ideal setting for gathering information on a company's target. Blogging can also present significant danger if not handled properly.

Key Terms

blog editor—The author of a blog.

blogosphere—The immense network of blogs that exist on the Web.

blogroll—A list of links to other blog sites that the editor thinks warrant attention.

false transparency—The practice of creating a marketing campaign that leads the audience to believe it is something other than a marketing promotion.

flog—A fake blog set up as marketing gimmick to help promote a company or support an ad campaign.

microblog—A blog made up of very short entries, often just a line or two to let friends, family or coworkers get a quick glimpse of what they blogger is doing at the time, or what they are thinking about.

paid blog—A blog written by an author who is paid to write positively about the brand or company that sponsors the blog.

scrapping—When bloggers grab headlines from other sites and post them to their own splog in an effort to fool readers into thinking they are reading original content.

splog—A blog comprised entirely of headlines and content pulled from legitimate news sources set up to attract an audience and generate revenue when readers click on ads.

Review Questions

1. A blog can be most closely compared to which of the following?
 - a. An online journal
 - b. An interactive timeline of events
 - c. A file sharing system
 - d. An online bulletin board
2. Which of the following is not usually found on a typical blog?
 - a. A blogroll
 - b. The ability to invite others to visit
 - c. The editor's name
 - d. Access to archived entries

3. Tags in a blog serve what purpose?
 - a. Give the blog a title
 - b. Help readers search for content
 - c. Let readers vote for whether or not they like a particular blog
 - d. All of the above
 - e. None of the above
4. With many blogs, readers that leave comments can also include links back to their own sites. True or False?
5. Which of the following can be included in a blog?
 - a. Text
 - b. Video
 - c. Images
 - d. All of the above
 - e. None of the above
6. As of December 2007, how many new blogs were being created every day?
 - a. 112,000,000
 - b. 30,000,000
 - c. 1,500,000
 - d. 120,000
7. Which of the following is the most likely reason that people are relying more on blogs as a source for news?
 - a. As TV viewership erodes, less news is being reported by the major networks.
 - b. Many people see mass media as biased, and turn to blogs for more unbiased reporting.
 - c. People only want to read news on which they can comment.
 - d. Because blogs tend to be more informal, typically boring news stories are more interesting when in a blog format.

8. A vlog is a:
 - a. Vertical blog - a blog that is written for a vertical market
 - b. Verbal blog - a blog that is supported by an audio clip
 - c. Video blog - a blog in a video format
 - d. None of the above
9. Which of the following statements is most true when it comes to fake blogs and character blogs?
 - a. Character blogs are the same as fake blogs-both provide false information.
 - b. Character blogs aren't considered fake because it's clear that character blogs are fictional.
10. Which of the following is not a significant reason most people maintain blogs?
 - a. To express themselves creatively
 - b. To venture into journalism
 - c. To document their personal experiences
 - d. To document their professional experiences
11. Bloggers stand apart from the general Internet population in which way?
 - a. Most bloggers go online for news and political information.
 - b. Most bloggers are younger, under the age of 30.
 - c. Most bloggers are male.
 - d. Most bloggers use dial-up connections.
12. Through February 2007, which global news item spurred the most blog entries?
 - a. Hurricane Katrina
 - b. Israel/Hezbollah conflict
 - c. Iraqi Constitutional Vote
 - d. Space shuttle Challenger explosion

13. One reason that blogs and mass media are converging is:
 - a. More news stories are written in a conversational tone
 - b. More blogs are among the most popular news sources
 - c. Mass media stories are increasingly allowing readers to leave comments
 - d. Blogrolls are increasingly including links to mass media sites

14. Which of the following statements about corporate blogging is most true?
 - a. Blogs are inexpensive to start but difficult to program.
 - b. Blogs can be expensive to start but require very little programming.
 - c. Blogs are inexpensive to start, but companies need to make a real commitment to maintaining them.
 - d. Blogs are inexpensive to start, but can potentially cause a lot of damage to a brand and should be avoided.

15. Which two things do companies need to balance when creating and maintaining a blog?
 - a. The number of entries made and the allocated blogging budget
 - b. The length of each blog entry and the fact that people who read corporate blogs don't want to invest a lot of time reading them.
 - c. The cost of blogging and the budget needed for other marketing campaigns
 - d. The conversational tone that blogs allow and the brand personality

16. Which of the following would be the worst example of a character blog?
 - a. Donald Trump maintaining a blog discussing issues regarding his show *The Apprentice*
 - b. Bart Simpson keeping a blog about the things going on in Springfield

- c. Zack Morris keeping a blog on what's been up with the *Saved by the Bell* gang since graduation
 - d. Hagrid keeping a blog about what's been going on at Hogwarts since Harry Potter graduated
17. Corporate blogs can help do which of the following?
- a. Improve traffic to the brand's main Web site
 - b. Help with internal communications
 - c. Improve customer service
 - d. All of the above
 - e. None of the above
18. When blogging, companies need to make sure:
- a. They update their blogs regularly
 - b. They never police the site, regardless of the comments that people leave
 - c. They write in the same carefully crafted voice that they use in other marketing tools
 - d. They don't provide links to their main Web site, so that readers won't think of them as too self-serving
19. Paying attention to the blogosphere can help a company because:
- a. It can give company's employees something to do in their off time
 - b. It can let them in on their competitors' secrets
 - c. It gives them information on trends in their target market
 - d. There are no real benefits for companies to pay attention to the blogosphere
20. "False transparency" is best defined as:
- a. A politically oriented blog that leans too far in one direction or another
 - b. A character blog
 - c. A blog that leads readers to think the blog is written by someone other than the real author
 - d. A blog that tells readers that a blog will be updated at certain times, when really entries are made more randomly

Projects

1. Pick three blogs within the same category (politics, sports, movies, etc.) and track them over a two week period. Compare and contrast the following:
 - a. How often does each site upload new entries?
 - b. How many comments does an entry on each site get on average?
 - c. How interesting is each relative to the other?

Briefly summarize each blog, and give your opinion as to why one might be more popular than another.

2. Find a B2B site that maintains a blog. In a two-page paper, describe how this blog differs from a personal blog in terms of voice, content, and other elements.
3. Pick a consumer product (a movie, sneakers, video games, etc.) and search the blogosphere for information and references to that product. In a two-page paper, describe general market trends and the feelings being expressed about the product you selected.
4. Research a blog campaign called “Walmarting Across America.” In a paper no longer than five pages, describe the campaign, whether or not it was successful and why.
5. Research recent news stories as relayed through blogs on the Technorati Web site. Find similar stories as relayed in the general media, like CNN or Fox News. In a two-page paper, describe the following:
 - a. Is the material and content presented differently in the blogs found on Technorati and the mainstream media? If so, how?
 - b. Which comes across as more trustworthy?
 - c. Which presents more relevant news?
 - d. In the future, would you be more likely to go to Technorati or a mainstream news source for updated information? Why?

Endnotes

1. “State of the Blogosphere.” Technorati <www.technorati.com> Aug. 2008.
2. Technorati <www.technorati.com> Aug. 2008.
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4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. “Zogby Poll: 67% View Traditional Journalism as ‘Out of Touch.’” *Zogby International* <www.zogby.com> 27 Feb. 2008.
7. Lenhart, Amanda, Fox, Susannah. “Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet’s New Storytellers.” Pew Internet & American Life Project, 19 Jul. 2006.