

PR And Blogging – How To Think About It

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Anyone who pays even scant attention to online has read about blogging. Web logs (blogs) have blossomed from tiny beginnings in the early 1990s into an online publishing event. There are hundreds of thousands of blogs now, most of which are not worth knowing about. Cyberjournalist.net lists dozens just for publications and journalists. On the other hand, some blogs generate news and influence events because their authors are respected as experts.

For example, Dan Gillmor of the *San Jose Mercury News* has a widely read blog (http://www.siliconvalley.com/mld/siliconvalley/business/columnists/dan_gillmor/ejournal/) considered authoritative on many high-tech issues. J.D. Lasica, an observer of and frequent commentator on online publishing keeps a blog (<http://jd.manilasites.com/>) that lets him discuss the news of the day. ABC News daily political blog called “The Note” (<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/dailynews/thenote.html>) is a comprehensive digest on politics and political races nationwide. CBS News blog called “Washington Wrap” (<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/02/26/politics/main502099.shtml>) is a similar digest of what is happening in the nation’s capital.

Blogs are a phenomenon with analogies to the birth of printing. They are easy to

create and cheap to maintain. However, unlike the printer’s craft that kept some out of publishing and rewarded others, there is no skill needed to start and maintain a blog. Several sources offer easy and inexpensive ways to set up and run one. However, there is craft in starting and maintaining a readable and useful blog.

Blogs as personal diaries have little application for PR practitioners unless associated with someone with name recognition. For example, a celebrity blog is a great way to reach a fan base. Blogs without a distinct purpose for existence are of less use. On the other hand, companies have shown the way to using blogs productively in reaching customers and others. Blogging is a proven public relations tool that practitioners should know about.

Bloggging Defined – Sort of

There is no easy way to define a blog because they are a little bit of everything. When they started back in the early to middle 1990s, they were principally link-driven journals that individuals kept on a Web site. That is, someone would find an interesting link and would post it for others to read, usually with commentary as to why it is important. Several well-known blogs still take this approach such as Instapundit (<http://www.instapundit.com/>) and memepool (<http://www.memepool.com/>). Blogs today have both individual and

community posting. For community posting, see metafilter (<http://www.metafilter.com/>) for well-known individual posting see Andrew Sullivan (<http://www.andrewsullivan.com/>). A blog now does not have to be link driven. It can be anything in the form of a time-date-stamped journal.

Jennifer Balderama of C/Net news said it with a bit of rhyming,

“Web logs give voice to people whom just a decade ago, you never would have heard from. There are war blogs, peace blogs, food blogs, crude blogs, humor blogs, culture blogs to occupy your day. Geek blogs, freak blogs, teen blogs, mean blogs, fantasticals and radicals who like to rant away. Worker bees and histories, punditry and poetry, diversity, adversity and spicy verbal play. Optimists, pessimists, enthusiasts and hobbyists, journalists and journal – ists with something big to say.”

Balderama is a blogger herself.

Blogs are variously described as an individual’s way to speak out, as a view on the world that one would not find in established journalism, as a way to discuss things with peer groups and more. Sometimes the effort is interesting and sometimes curious. For example, the blog-author of Inluminet Net marketing (<http://www.inluminet.com/weblog/>) places photos of scantily clad women next to his musings about small business marketing. Sex sells.

There is one common characteristic about blogging that all blog authors have to deal with. Blogging is demanding. It

has to be updated regularly if one is to keep readership. This places a burden on the blogger to find topics that one can write about. As a blogger myself (http://www.online-pr.com/Online-PRThoughts/OnlinePRtidbits_and_thoughts.htm), I can vouch for the difficulty of finding suitable ideas five days a week. Some believe blogs should be updated throughout the day, but they aren’t. A blog like Marketing Sherpa (<http://sherpablog.blogspot.com/>) posts a few times a month but usually good information that one needs to know. This site is unusual, however. Most could not afford to be so dilatory and maintain an audience.

One thing that blogging does not do is replace journalism as we know it. Journalism is a process of gathering, checking and distributing news that is above blogging. Journalists still provide a gatekeeper effect and credibility that opinionated bloggers do not. In fact, I believe editors should not allow reporters to have blogs on topics they cover to prevent charges of bias. (Columnists are different. They are expected to express opinions.) Journalism provides accuracy and deadline frequency. A blogger can do the same, but it is not the same unless there is an established process for receiving, checking then publishing news like Slashdot attempts to do (<http://slashdot.org/>).

Blogging Software and Tools.

Blogs took off, by all accounts, when software was developed that allowed one to publish without coding. Today, blogs allow entry in the form of basic word processing that is published immediately to the blog without interim steps.

There are a number of free and paid blogging sites and software tools. They are listed below:

- Pitas.com (<http://www.pitas.com/>)
- Blogger.com (<http://www.blogger.com/>) from Pyra Labs.
- Diaryland (<http://diaryland.com/>), an early blogging software.
- Blogspot.com (<http://www.blogspot.com/>), a second blogging service from Pyra Labs.
- Radio Userland (<http://www.userland.com/>) from Userland software, which is sold to users and offers advantages over free blog sites such as site summaries and auto notification of interested parties when one makes a new entry.
- Manilasites (<http://www.manilasites.com/>), which was full and not taking more users until recently.
- Livejournal (<http://www.livejournal.com/>), a free service.
- Greymatter (<http://www.noahgrey.com/greysoft>) which bills itself as open source software.
- Bloglet. (<http://www.bloglet.com/>) Service that lets one subscribe to blogs and get notified when there is a new posting on one.
- Eastgate systems. (<http://www.eastgate.com/Tinderbox/>) which offers a personal content management system called Tinderbox.
- WebCrimson (<http://www.webcrimson.com/>)

which offers a Web publishing system for small businesses.

These are not all the software and blogging sources out there but they provide a spectrum in which one can review features, functions and benefits. In addition to blogging sites and software, there are as well blogging directories that let one find the kind of blog that he or she might be looking to read. These include:

- Blogfinder (<http://www.blogfinder.com/>)
 - Eatonweb. (<http://portal.eatonweb.com/>), which tracks over 7,500 blogs by type.
 - Blogdex. (<http://blogdex.media.mit.edu/>) from MIT's Media Lab.
 - Daypop (<http://www.daypop.com/>)
- None of these sites are comprehensive, but they provide an indication of the broad topics that bloggers discuss.

Blogging and PR

In conventional blogging, anyone can write anything at any time. However, this is not suitable for public relations purposes. In PR, practitioners need to maintain relationships with the key audiences that help their organizations survive and succeed. Secondly, PR practitioners are spokespersons for others and not for themselves. They do not have the freedom to speak out about company and marketplace issues without checking with those who have direct control over these areas. Hence, a practitioner should consider carefully before writing something that comes to mind without a semblance of accuracy and proportion to the statement.

It is possible for a PR practitioner to adopt an outrageous voice that is followed enthusiastically by target audiences, but if the individual is shown to be in error time and again, credibility becomes an issue, as does employment. There are few situations in which a PR practitioner enhances audience relationships and personal rewards by being a demagogue. So the first facet of blogging – the freedom to say anything – is compromised when the tool is used for PR. This alone makes blogging for PR purposes different than personal blogging anyone else might do. Credibility is key to the PR practitioner, both internally and externally.

For PR practitioners who blog, accuracy is a burden. Journalists have editors to help them. Bloggers don't. One should take care to check references and make sure of facts before using them in an online journal. That is why PR blogging should use hyperlinking as much as possible to refer to sources of information. Originally, bloggers listed hyperlinks to help users who didn't have time to scour the web daily. The blog hyperlink was a shortcut to help one remain up-to-date on what was happening. Today, bloggers appear to cite sources by hyperlink as much to let one look for oneself at the original statement, news story or other topic that generated the blog entry. The PR practitioner should be as careful. If the PR blogger cannot use a hyperlink, then the he or she should quote someone who is the source of information. E.g., "Just got a call from X who said that we won the Widget contract. Stay tuned."

A second difference between a PR blog and a personal blog is purposefulness. There is no point in maintaining an

online journal as a PR tool unless one has something to say. Why blog if you have a functioning communications system that is reasonably fast in letting employees and others know about organization news? Blogging just adds to noise.

The answer to this objection is that blogging might be an excellent way to maintain a stream of news and organizational viewpoint to the organization at large that would take too much time to process through the communications system. For example, mentions of contract wins, CEO and senior executive visitations, policy changes that employees should be aware of but might miss and so on. The stream of tidbits could become a journal of the organization's life and a source of information to employees who might otherwise miss formal communications. For example:

- CEO Smith visits Warrentown today to deliver a speech on company goals. Check the following link for the text of the speech.
- Three contract wins are about to be announced out of the Z division. This comes as part of the business' new focus on the Y market. Call Q for more information.
- Does anybody know where the history exhibit for the company went? It was last seen five years ago. Check this link to see photos from some of the exhibits.
- HR called a few minutes ago and asked us to publicize the upcoming changes in the medical plan. Go to the following link where the changes will be explained in a day or two or call Z.

The virtue of diary entries is brevity. One does not have to wade through a policy statement or a press release to get the gist of something. Blogging in this sense is similar to a wire service and the blogger an editor serving up fresh news quickly without the approval machinery of the typical corporate communications department getting in the way. This means, however, that the PR practitioner who serves as an organizational blogger knows the limits in which he or she works.

A third consideration that PR practitioners have to take into account with blogging is the evanescent nature of it. Journal entries enter and exit the blogger's diary, most never to be seen again except in archive form. So, how does one find easily what has been blogged in the past? That is, if I am an employee who five days after reading the entry about the benefit plan wants to get the hyperlink and check the changes in the plan, how do I easily find the journal entry where the hyperlink was given? Some blogging software handles this through addition of a search engine, but it is not the same as having a repository of well-constructed information that is readily available, such as white papers that lay out of the features, functions and benefits of a product. Rather, blogging advances structured information by letting one know that it is coming or supplements it by adding facts and information that might not have been in the original documents.

Blogging entries without relationship to structured information, while useful in personal journals, would seem to have little application in PR blogging. That is, if an organization's news and policies

were in the form of diary entries that had to be searched each time one wanted to find something, would it be as useful as a structured document? It does not seem to me that it would, although some organizations have found that blogging daily activities and policies has proven useful, especially in product development cycles.

This is blogging as a form of small group discussion, and it might have potential for large corporate communications departments. For example, a department might maintain a blog of media contacts, events and other happenings that keeps department members up to date on what is going on and also allows department members to express ideas and opinions on upcoming activities or challenges. The same could be done with divisional and corporate PR departments all making entries into the same blog as a community. There have been several applications of blogging in support of this goal used both internally and externally. In one case, cited by *Wired* news (May 9, 2002), Macromedia, the software company that makes the Flash and Shockwave software, adopted a "blog strategy." Macromedia had five of its customer relations managers, called "community managers," start their own blogs as a forum to discuss new products, explain features and answer questions from the field. Customers immediately praised the idea because it provides them with a heads-up on issues and ideas that they would not otherwise get except through formal – and perhaps, slow -- communications from the company, phone calls to customer service or other developers who have had a similar experience.

One longtime, high-tech journalist, John Udell, believes blogging can change the way high-tech PR is handled by providing the background for products and innovations before introducing them formally. Udell says a blog would help him because *“I’ll know where you’re coming from, and why, and how you got where you are, and we can jump straight to the really interesting bit: where you’re going (and why). Our conversation will inform and improve the quality of what ends up in the print version of InfoWorld.”*

He is also frank to say that he could avoid the avalanche of calls from PR practitioners inviting him to press conferences, reminding him of press conferences, asking him whether he read a release, etc. Udell, of course, is interested in talking with developers themselves. He has little interest in dealing with PR practitioners, and he might be right as long as a company can trust its engineers to deliver their opinions without overstepping company boundaries. (However, that would seem hardly the case.) Udell is a journalist used to frequenting labs and talking bits and bytes with developers. He is unusual in his depth of understanding of the field. Most journalists would not have his depth of knowledge nor would they necessarily spend the time to read a blog in order to get updated about the evolution of a product.

However, Udell does have a point. Fundamentally, blogging is user-driven. Because it is a low-cost and widely available medium, user experts of all kinds can weigh in on a topic outside of the hierarchy of a corporation and provide a depth of understanding that one

might not ordinarily get. Some have called blogging an “anti-intranet” because intranets have so many layers of departmental and editorial control over information posted on them. However, from a PR perspective, there are few situations in which information is left uncontrolled. That is, the practitioner evaluates all information for its usefulness in promoting a company’s relationships with target audiences. An engineer making cracks about the company “compromising” the vision of a forthcoming product is not something a PR practitioner could or should let into an organizational blog.

To Blog or Not

Once PR practitioners understand that a blog is not a free-form expression within an organizational context, there are practical uses to which the tool can be put to use. Think of a blog as a low-cost and fast publishing tool that can provide an important dimension to an individual and/or organization in terms of getting news out quickly. Because the diary is available to all at the same time, it is faster to use than media like e-mail and because it requires no coding or expertise to use, it can appear at the speed of thought. One need only type the journal entry and push a button to get it published. In addition, because it has a permanence that Instant Messaging does not have, blogging leaves an accessible trail of ideas, facts and comments into which one can reach to develop a history of an issue, question or challenge without resorting to reconstructing e-mail threads from different places and times.

Some organizations will have little use for this kind of low-cost publishing

speed. Others will find it invaluable in terms of keeping executives and key employee groups informed about news, events and other happenings. In the Wired World, speed is as important as accuracy and blogs push speed limits. It would be exceptionally interesting to see distributed blogs in use among communicators in charge of fast-moving events, so the communicators can keep each other up to speed without resorting to e-mail, phone calls or face-to-face meetings.

However, the criterion for success in such an endeavor is getting all parties to use a blog. That is not necessarily easy because old habits are hard to break. Nonetheless, blogs are one more tool in the communicator's kitbag and they should be used where and when they make sense.

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