

Blogs link brands, buyers They're an effective strategy, if they're not too corporate

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Roo Reynolds offers up ramblings about his trip to Reykjavik and a friend's dicey attempt to write a limerick on his personal blog at rooreynolds.com.

But his deeper passion consumes his second blog at eightbar.co.uk, where the engineer from IBM's Housley operation in the United Kingdom talks about the three-dimensional "metaverse" of virtual worlds such as Second Life, a Web environment where people live through a digital representation of themselves.

"People think of blogging as writing down their thoughts but really, it's a connected thing," said Reynolds, who calls himself the Metaverse Evangelist. "It's a way of reaching a wider audience and also creating a question-and-answer forum."

For businesses, blogging is a way to reach customers, colleagues and clients, but it's about more than just slapping down an electronic stream of consciousness. It can be part of a larger strategy to reach out.

"Blogging stands in stark contrast to the mass-media, one-way broadcast method," said Peter Kim, an analyst with Forrester Research in Boston. "The overarching thing is to create a more individual level of conversation between a brand and the consumer."

The best companies at business blogging have been technology companies and a handful of large, non-tech firms, and they use them for a variety of purposes, Kim said.

According to an informal, voluntary and inconclusive wiki survey last year of Fortune 500 companies, there were 43 firms from the list with public corporate blogs. (A wiki is an online resource that lets users add and edit content.) But a Forrester survey in June of companies with 500 employees or more found that 54 percent were either using a blog or thinking about it.

Vince Ferraro's HP Laserjet blog fills in readers about all things printer. In his FastLane blog, General Motors Vice Chairman Bob Lutz spouts off about GM's new-car designs but also uses it as a way to answer criticism.

Ed Brill, the Lotus software executive, uses Edbrill.com to comment about the industry, Lotus competitors and the popular collaborative software program. But he intersperses it with observations of Germany's wine country and the wonderful pizza he ate in Rome.

At Microsoft, there are blogs about every product the Redmond, Wash.-based software giant puts out. They can be accessed by searching for "Microsoft blog communities."

Google offers blogs galore on topics such as Gmail, search tips, online maps and Internet advertising. The Mountain View, Calif.-based tech star also provides forums for public-policy issues as well as for employee observations.

"It's less about writing than it is about conversation and dialogue. You can misspell words. It's about self-expression. That's what really makes a good blog. It's not Strunk and White," Kim said, referring to the authors of the popular grammar book, *Elements of Style*. "It's more about whether a person has passion."

Fake blogs incur fans' wrath

But before tackling a blog, the writer should know his audience and conform to the unwritten rules of blogging, or face the backlash of the blogosphere.

The biggest demand is that the blog be honest and transparent.

David Berger, an executive involved with new media at IBM, said Big Blue has about 4,000 active blogs, but it doesn't assign them. That would be in direct conflict with the way blogs work outside of corporate America. Personal blogs are written by people who talk frankly about their world.

"If you overtly try to use blogs to advance some sort of corporate end, you've already lost the battle. There's a smart way to capitalize on the medium. It's in the authenticity of the bloggers themselves," Berger said.

Despite its short history, there have been some celebrated gaffes in the world of blogging.

Last year, Sony was exposed for a "flog," or fake blog, about two "friends" who hyped the company's PlayStation Portable video game console at alliwantforxmassisapsp.com, which has been taken down. Sony fans were outraged when the site was traced to a marketing company in St. Louis.

A blog earlier this year titled "Walmarting across America" followed a happy-go-lucky couple, Jim and Laura, as they drove their RV across the United States, parking in Wal-Mart lots. Later, it was discovered that the flog had been staged by Wal-Mart's public relations firm, Edelman.

"The biggest mistake is to try to shade your identity or your product," IBM's Berger said.

Tone takes on site's style

Blogging can achieve different ends for different companies.

At Bankrate.com in North Palm Beach, the financial Web site offers blogs on mortgages, taxes, credit cards, bankruptcy and the actions of the Federal Reserve. The blogs read more like newspaper columns, taking the tone of an expert.

At Multiply.com in Boca Raton, the social-networking site updates subscribers about changes to the site. It also maintains three discussion-group blogs - to which you must be a member - where staffers, heavy users and outside software developers can share ideas and talk about how to improve the site.

"We use it for tips and tricks and new services. We also do a lot of survey type of posts. Our users really shape our site," Multiply.com Chief Executive Peter Pezaris said.

Boca Raton-based MoreVisibility, which helps other firms raise their exposure in Google and Yahoo searches, posts a blog with free pointers on improving a business' standing on such search lists.

"Everyone in the office is responsible for contributing to the blog. The reasoning is that readers are seeing a wider range of perspectives," MoreVisibility President Andy Wetzler said.

Wetzler's firm actually advises companies to post a blog on its Web site. Blogs are text-heavy Web pages and are updated more often than static pages. Because keywords show up more often, search engines give blogs greater prominence in their listings. And search algorithms give preference to sites that update frequently.

"They are Web sites that aren't flashy but they are content-driven rather than graphics-driven," Wetzler said. "The search engines put a lot of emphasis on content. ... If content is updated frequently, that's recognized by the bots," which are software programs that automatically search the Internet for Web sites once a word or phrase is entered into a search engine.

Blogs that are not so kind to a company also appear on search-engine lists. Two companies that do business here, AT&T and Comcast, end up in blogs in rants charging them with everything from poor service to high cost.

Negative blogs not so bad

But some firms, such as Boca Raton-based ADT Security Services, have entire blogs aimed at taking shots at the company. In this case, the site is Adtsuck.com. To be fair, the site has only two postings, both from 2006, and neither identifies the writer.

But this unedited line from it mirrors the typical anti-company blog posting:

"When I was sold on the ADT Security Service, the Saleman gave the impression that ADT was the #1 in Security and service. Well, that was obviously a downright lie. I mean, everytime we had to schedule an appointment due to a system malfunction, it was nearly impossible to get someone out to fix it."

In an e-mail, ADT spokeswoman Ann Lindstrom said the company tries to confirm whether the complaint is legitimate and tries to solve the problem.

"We make every effort to resolve customer issues promptly and directly so customers are not compelled to voice complaints through blogs," she said.

Debbie Weil, author of *The Corporate Blogging Book: Everything You Need to Know to Get It Right*, said negative blogs aren't so bad. They mean customers are reacting to the company.

The worst strategy for a company is to be too afraid to blog, or to write a blog too infrequently to garner a following. And if the corporate blogger writes in "corporate speak" or in a fashion that channels only one way, it won't last.

"Companies have to get out and mix it up with consumers," Weil said. "A company that doesn't reach out and interact with this community looks like a big monolith."