

BLOGGING AS A BUSINESS TOOL

By Stephanie Lundberg

The Internet provides many valuable tools to businesses when it comes to marketing and promoting themselves. Web blogging – or blogging for short – is one important method now catching on with businesses operating in the virtual world.

According to Rhaj Sharma, lead Web consultant for GuamWEBZ Web Design and Development, it is important to understand the difference between a company blog and a company website, and why they serve different functions.

“A blog is a blog, and has its purpose,” says Sharma. “The blog should not replace the website. ... Blogs are usually not used to gain new customers, as they perhaps don’t talk too much about your organization. But they can be used to retain and develop a customer following.”

What’s the difference?

A company uses a website to explain itself to a customer; in other words, a company website provides all the information the customer will need to transact with that particular business.

A blog, on the other hand, plays a very different role in the online environment. It can be thought of as a platform through which a business can communicate with its customers. It may feature discussions about industry and company news, product reviews, expert commentary or how-to explanations.

Above all, a blog has two primary features that distinguish it from a website — it is generally more interactive and intimate, and it is updated on a more frequent and regular basis.

Why blog?

Sharma says GuamWEBZ often recommends blogs to clients as a way to supplement their websites, as having that kind of intimate dialogue with customers can be very advantageous for a company. “A blog with useful content can also make you look like a pro, especially in the industry you serve. When you provide valuable free tips through a blog, your customers and potential prospects appreciate that,” says



Sharma.

“Another reason why a business should have a blog is because blogs allow you to form and maintain a following, since [bloggers] are expected to post regularly and on schedule,” he says. “Visitors to the blog expect that, and return regularly to access more of your relevant content. This is great for customer retention. Websites in general would not have this type of following.”

How should companies begin?

Because business blogs require a more professional and functional design than personal blogs, Sharma recommends that companies find a firm experienced in building and managing blogs to ensure they’re communicating the right message.

In addition, companies should expect Web design firms to provide additional services and training on topics such as how to generate content, how to access and interpret the blog’s visitor statistics, and how to optimize its website’s placement in search engine results.

After the initial investment of having the blog professionally built and employees properly trained, the business should be able to update and promote the blog independently without further financial expense.

Sharma has several other tips for companies that wish to create a successful blog:

Tip #1: Use a free blog platform, and use your company’s unique brand.

According to Sharma, companies should not pay hosting charges for blogging. Instead they should work with their Web development firm to select a free blogging platform that will meet the company’s blogging needs.

In addition, whenever possible, a company should use its brand name in the Web address of the blog (also known as the domain name). It is an inexpensive way to raise public awareness of a business’ brand identity. “Get a unique domain name. Most free blogs will give you a free domain name such as yourname.blogcompanyname.com,” Sharma says. “We don’t like that ‘blogcompanyname’ there. The blog is all about your business and you. Your [company’s] domain name is more professional and great for branding.”

Tip #2: Post quality, relevant and unique content.

To be most successful, a company blog should include content that is significant to the customer and timely to local events

and trends. "What would make someone actually visit your blog? It could depend on a number of factors, but one thing is for sure; it needs to have quality content, which is both unique and relevant to the visitor," Sharma says.

For example, a plumbing company may be interested in providing its customers with useful tips about how to check for piping leaks, how to save money on supplies, or information on plumbing products. The key, Sharma says, is for the business to target its audience and provide information applicable to their lives.

"This [plumbing company] blog from a Guam business would be successful if it catered to us on Guam," Sharma says. "For example, the content could be relevant to our water bills, the hard water causing our toilets to stain, or anything else [of note locally]. Plus, the local store directory would be useful, since it would be for only Guam-based stores. [Businesses should] define their target market and deliver relevant content."

Businesses should also be aware of a common pitfall among company blogs: recycling content from elsewhere on the Internet. "Clients may inadvertently infringe on someone else's copyright by borrowing content to post on their blog," Sharma says. "Clients need to be careful with this, as it can compromise the credibility of their blog. It is best to generate unique content."

Lastly, Sharma advises businesses to keep their blogging within the context of their professional expertise, and away from topics outside their business' purview. "Don't stray away from the subject matter," he says. "If it's a business blog, keep it professional. And if you must express your feelings outside the scope of what your business does, start another blog for yourself."

Tip #3: Decide on a schedule for updating your blog, and stick to it.

"The most common mistake is that the blog does not get managed. This means that the client stops posting on a regular and scheduled basis, leaving the blog with old posts," Sharma says.

Not sticking to a regular update schedule will likely lead to the blog losing readership, and the company losing that relationship with current and potential customers. Consequently, it is very important for companies to routinely update their blogs, be it daily, weekly or monthly.

Tip #4: Ensure that your blog incorporates other social media and Web services.

Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as bookmarking sites such as Digg and Reddit, have embeddable features (links that can be added to any blog or website) that allow readers to bookmark and share content they like with their friends and family. There are also numerous syndication tools, known as RSS feeds, which allow readers to subscribe to blogs they frequent and thus read selected content all in one place.

Companies seeking to manage a successful blog should consider taking advantage of these tools; these sites provide companies with an opportunity to make their blogs easily found and 'sharable', so that their content reaches an audience outside their current customer base. "You want to form a connection with your visitors," Sharma says. "You want to turn leads to action — preferably sales."

Parting Wisdom

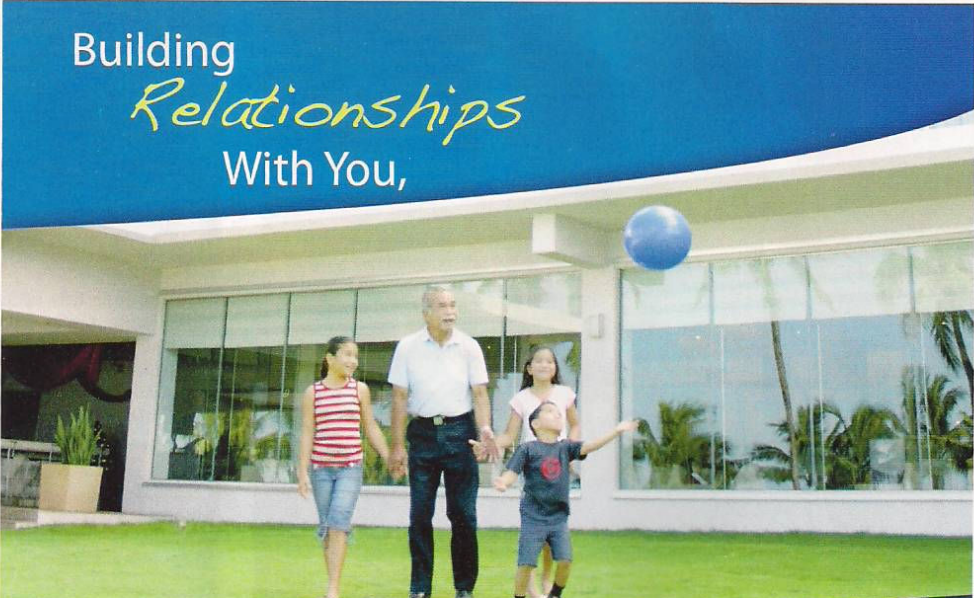
Finally, Sharma counsels businesses to link their websites and blogs in a functional, easy-to-access manner. Also, companies should work with their Web development firms to enhance their blog visibility, which can take some time and effort.

"As for driving traffic to the website and/or blog, this is a very long and detailed conversation. The business needs to engage in proactive Web-based marketing, which includes the most traditional marketing concepts to being a social media butterfly, to implementing more Web-savvy techniques related to search engine marketing," he says.


He was careful to reiterate the most important issue for businesses considering a blog, however. "The point is, if you are [blogging for] a business, then you cannot use the blog to replace a website. If you are simply blogging for personal interest, then that's fine, and you can get as creative as you like; no website is needed."

"Either way, content is king," he says.

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