

Better Business Blogging



An Introduction to Business Blogs, their benefits & how to promote them

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1. What is a Blog?

There are lots of different opinions and descriptions of what a blog is, so it would seem sensible to start with a brief overview.

A good place to start for some background on the terminology of blogs and the blogosphere is Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>). There, blogs are described as:

“The term blog is a shortened form of weblog or web log. Authoring a blog, maintaining a blog or adding an article to an existing blog is called “blogging”. Individual articles on a blog are called “blog posts,” “posts” or “entries”. A person who posts these entries is called a “blogger”.

Blogs did indeed start life as a personal online publishing system which allowed individuals to quickly and simply write, publish and distribute their own opinions via the internet on any subject that took their fancy. These would then appear in chronological order, hence often giving the appearance of a diary type format.

Mainly because of this, blogs are still often described as “Online diaries” - however, this is now akin to describing a PC simply as a Word Processor. Certainly, in both cases, it is one of the uses that they can be put to, but it barely scratches the surface of what you are really able to do with them, particularly from a business perspective.

Looking at blogs in another way, they could also be considered as a special type of website. However, by using the special characteristics that a blog offers, they have now been converted into a hugely effective marketing and communications tool for businesses (see below).

2. Special Characteristics of Blogs

So what are the special characteristics that blogs have which make them so great both for personal use and for business use?

The main elements that you should be aware of which will make a significant impact on your business are:

- **No technical knowledge required:** you don't need technical expertise to write a blog. You add pages or articles through a “Windows” type of interface so there is no need for a web designer to update it for you - you can do it all yourself and in double quick time.
- **Readers can leave comments:** your readers can respond to your posts so that you can start to see who is interested in the same areas as you or as a business open a conversation with potential clients, suppliers or partners. The perfect opener to developing a relationship and a network!
- **Automatically organised:** ‘categories’ and ‘archives’ are integral parts of a blog and each post will automatically be placed correctly according to the

selection you make. This gives great organisation and structure to a blog which is perfect for visitors and Search Engines alike, and which allows you to concentrate on the content.

- **Search Engine magnets:** with regular posts, categorised content and search engine friendly links and addresses, business blogs become ideal places for Search Engines to find the type of content they love ... and you can rank very highly!
- **Instant distribution of information:** using RSS and pinging, blogs allow you to widely distribute your latest news and information, both instantly and automatically to Search Engines, directories and your readers (and potential customers!)
- **Multiple Authors:** not only can one person add content but you can allow access to any number of people so that you have several authors contributing to a topic or a series of topics. It also opens up the possibilities for blogs as tools ideally suited to internal communications within a company.
- **Internal and External Links:** blogs thrive by links and referring to other articles so that conversations and ideas can be taken up and developed. At its best, this allows a viral effect in terms of promotion and helps develop both relationships and networks.
- **Permalinks:** every post and every category has its own individual address, forever! This means that you can refer to them in articles, emails, newsletters etc safe in the knowledge that they will always be found. Another great feature for the Search Engines.

3. What are Personal Blogs?

A personal blog is generally set up to allow the author to discuss their views on anything and everything, so the topics change with each post according to mood or inclination. As already mentioned, this is where blogs started and it is essentially a personal diary or scrapbook, which can be great fun to both read and write.

There are now tools which are freely available to allow anyone to set up a personal blog quickly and simply - while these are not advised for a Business Blog simply because they offer less control over a tool which will become key to your business. The most well know is Blogger (www.blogger.com), owner by Google, though there are others which are as either locally offered via ISPs or through blog specific companies such as Wordpress.com (this is the hosted, not the full version).

4. What are Business Blogs?

Business Blogs developed as a natural progression. They use the same technology but tend to be very targeted in terms of their subject matter and focus on a specific market area or niche. In fact, something to bear in mind: the most successful are set up with both an audience and a business focus in mind which they then stick to. Why?

Because the audience they are looking to reach will expect it - that is why they were attracted to it in the first place and that is why they will return and recommend the blog to others.

In general terms, it is a powerful marketing and communications tool which helps companies to communicate better with stakeholders of all types, from customers to suppliers and from partners to employees. Companies do of course use blogs in very different ways, each according to their own requirements. However, those which have used them most successfully, have managed to develop better relationships and greater trust with their target groups, and hence market themselves more effectively as a result.

In addition, with the arrival of Search Engines as THE research tool, this focus proved to be doubly beneficial for a Business Blog owner. The tighter the focus of the content, then the more likely it is to be keyword rich and so gain the type of Search Engine results that would make an SEO professional proud! A well set-up Business Blog has a structure which just adds further weight to this.

5. Why should a Business have a Blog?

Firstly, let's make it clear that a Business Blog is not a place where you keep and report a diary of your company's activities - a personal blog may sometimes be used as a diary, but a business blog most certainly is not!

You should think of a Business Blog much more as part of your online marketing toolkit, indeed as a central element of it. It can be used in a number of different ways according to your business requirements but all centred around the ideas of two-way communication with prospects and customers (essentially leading to conversations and connections) as well as general marketing and business development.

Specifically, a blog can be particularly beneficial in:

- Differentiating your business, products and services
- Attracting prospects and developing new business opportunities
- Promoting your business through the Media and online Public Relations
- Acting as a central element of your Search Engine marketing
- Researching and Developing new Markets, Products or Niches
- Developing Communication channels to your market
- Helping to enhance and build your visibility and brand
- Positioning Yourself as the Expert
- Improving Internal Communications

In all of these areas, you will find that Business Blogs are not only very *effective* but also very *cost effective* as well.

Blogs help to *personalise your company and the products and services* that you offer by opening up direct channels of communication with your prospects and customers and engaging with them. By doing so, they also help to build much *higher levels of trust* so that, in fact, the readers of your Blog often become your most passionate word-of-mouth ambassadors.

On top of that, the inbuilt distribution facilities such as RSS and ping, as well as the blog specific marketing opportunities that trackbacks, comments and social bookmarking all add extra ways and means to promote your blog and therefore your business. You also have the fact that blogs are *very search engine friendly* because of the way that they are written and organised (automatically, I might add) and because the philosophy of linking is an integral part of the blogosphere - as a result, business blogs have the tendency to rank more highly than other types of websites.

A Business Blog is a flexible and yet powerful marketing tool for small businesses and large corporate companies alike which offers a surprisingly large range of options and benefits. In fact, once a business has the chance to have their questions answered about blogs and understand what they can offer, the focus of the questions tend to change from “Why have a blog?” to “What sort of a blog will be best?”.

6. Benefits of Business Blogging

As you have been reading this introduction, you have probably been thinking about some of the ways in which you could use a Blog for your own business - perhaps with a view to reaching new audiences, improving your company’s visibility on the web and your interactions with your customers, as well as actually increasing sales. Essentially, an important part of the online marketing for your business!

Don’t forget that a Business Blog can also give you, your company and those who work for it, a place to collect and share ideas and relevant information with your customers and prospects. This in turn generates mutual trust and builds to a relationship which is more like a partnership than the typical ‘supplier-customer’ sales relationship.

If I had to separate out some of the main benefits and uses, then the principal ones would be:

- **Develop your position and your reputation as an expert** - Demonstrate your knowledge, expertise and experience on matters relating to your industry and give yourself the chance to show your expert position in your specialism.
- **Business Differentiation** - a blog will give you the opportunity to show how your business and services differ from (and are hopefully superior to) those of your competition. Done well, it will set you apart in terms of the benefits you offer.

- **Search Engine Marketing & Visibility** - Higher rankings and therefore greater visibility on the main Search Engines such as Google, Yahoo and MSN because of the updated content, great (automatic) structure and the focused content which will attract Search Engines and readers alike.
- **Creating a real dialogue with those who matter** - You have the opportunity and the ideal tool to start to open up new and very real communications channels with your customers, prospects, partners and suppliers.
- **Public Relations & Press Releases** - While not the ideal use for blogs from the point of view of blogging purists, business blogs remain fabulous marketing tools to distribute and then promote your company information and press releases.
- **Lead Generation** - additional visitors, better positioning and improved search engines ranking all provide the chance to develop an increased lead generation opportunity. (Lots more ideas available - drop me a line at blogappraisal@theblogcoach.co.uk and I'll explain how!)
- **Brand Awareness** - An ideal channel through which to put your brand in front of the customer and communicate what it stands for - you could be a small company or multinational, either way you are strengthening your online position.
- **Educational Marketing** - Show how your products and services can solve your customers problems rather than rely on interruption marketing and "in your face" selling. You could also look at this in terms of relational marketing because that's exactly what you're creating, better relationships with your marketplace.
- **Internal Communications** - a blog is an excellent tool to help to share information easily within your company, manage projects, develop teams and hugely improve the internal communications

And remember that a Blog is also very easy to use because you can write using a "Word" type of interface which means that you do not need a web designer to put information on the web for you any more - anyone in your organisation with access to the internet (and permission, of course!) can update and add information as required!

7. What to consider when starting a Business Blog

Whether you are a large corporate organisation or an independent consultant or small business owner, as you start a Business Blog, there are a number of elements that you should be looking to consider to give your blog every opportunity for success.

While the exact requirements will differ according to how you intend to use your blog, there are certain questions that you will want to have answers for before you start to write it.

In particular, there are three key questions which will underpin all of your blogging activity; they are:

i) What do you want to do with your Business Blog?

Make sure that you have a clear vision of what you want to do with your Business Blog - are you using it as a customer service tool, as a marketing or branding method, to promote a particular product or service, as a market research or product development tool or any number of specific uses it is well suited to. Going through this process will ensure it has focus and will not become a “jack of all trades” and “master of none” - the more focused it is, the more successful it is likely to be.

ii) Who is your target audience for your Business Blog?

Avoid trying to make it be “all things to all people” - it isn’t possible. Once again focus is important, so decide on your target audience and write the blog for them with content they are looking for and a style that they will warm to. If you have lots of different groups that you wish to appeal to then you might be better off setting up separate blogs to cater for each of these specific areas.

iii) What results are you looking to achieve?

What goals do you have for your Business Blog and just as importantly, how are you going to measure them? There is going to be time and effort involved and you will be looking for specific results at the end of it - therefore, from the start, it’s good to know what results you are looking for. So decide on the criteria you want to work with and how you wish to measure them.

Following on from these, there are a number of other areas which are sensible to consider. Some are technical in nature while others relate to the running of the blog and its promotion.

i) What Blogging software to choose?

There are a number of options available each with different benefits - by deciding what you wish to do with it, what it will be integrated with and what degree of control or customisation you require, you will be able to focus in on which would be best for your needs. The best advice is to choose one which will grow and develop with you as well as fitting with your current business and technical requirements. Free hosted software (such as *Blogger*) will seldom do this or give you sufficient control, so look at *Wordpress* (full version) or *Movable Type* for self hosted systems and *Typepad* for a hosted solution as good starter points.

ii) Should I host it on my website or on a different domain?

As a general rule, if it sits comfortably alongside your website and complements the information on it, then integrate it into your website. If, on the other hand, you are looking to present an objective view on your industry

or want a separate identity for branding purposes then choose a separate domain name and run it separately.

iii) What to call the Business Blog?

Either let it reflect your company and branding, or make sure it contains your keywords ... or preferably both. As a rule of thumb, though: choose something which you are still going to feel comfortable with in a year's time. You might like to check some additional ideas on choosing a Business Blog name at www.betterbusinessblogging.com/bloggin-basics/what-to-call-your-business-blog/.

iv) Look and Feel of the Blog

If you are using it as part of your website, then integrate the look and feel with that. There's no need for your visitors to really know that they are on a blog - remember it's the benefits that blogs offer that is important, not the technology. If it is on a separate domain, then design your Business Blog with the image you want to portray but don't use the default template that the blogging software provides. Why? Default template = zero differentiation!

v) How will it integrate with your other marketing activities?

Blogging is an excellent marketing tool, as well as having being strong in other areas. However, it is not a magic wand to cure all marketing ills, so it is necessary to decide how to best use it in conjunction with your other marketing, business development and customer service activities.

vi) Who will be blogging and how often?

If you are a small business or individual, then the decision about who will be blogging will be a straightforward one. For a larger organisation, the decision will depend on what the blog is focused on and hence who will be the best person to write with knowledge and passion about it. As for how often you should blog, frequency isn't as important as consistency so try to post regularly and keep your readers informed. As a caveat, however, you should be posting at least twice a week to give yourself the best chance of success.

vii) How to deal with comments?

Receiving comments on a blog is one of the more satisfying aspects of blogging because it shows that you have engaged your readers enough for them to want to comment. Some companies, however, view it with dread because of possible comments being aired which are not entirely positive. While I would always recommend being open to and responding to comments, the decision ultimately is in the hands of the blogger.

If you have thought through these elements, then you will be in a much stronger position to set up your blog and concentrate on writing the posts and building your readership with a strong base in place.

8. Courses, Workshops and Training

We run workshops and courses for both companies and individuals wishing to learn more about Blogging and, in particular, how to use it in their businesses to market their company and products, get closer to their customers, improve communications internally, plus the other benefits that we mentioned above. There are also small group online courses which include one to one coaching as part of the two month package - contact Mark (mark.white@betterbusinessblogging.com) for details.

Most of these sessions are run on-site (over a half day or full day according to your needs) so that you can benefit from information and examples which are tailored to your own requirements. You will also have the opportunity to explore at your leisure the ways in which business blogging could be best used in your organisation.

These courses will often include areas such as:

- Background to Blogging
- Business Uses for Blogs
- Corporate Blogging Requirements
- Blogs for Internal Communications
- Marketing your Blog (online and blog specific methods)
- Marketing your Blog (focusing on Search Engine Optimisation)
- Monitoring the Blogs and the Blogosphere
- Blogging Platforms and Software
- Setting up and Starting a Blog
- Writing your Blog and keeping momentum
- RSS Feeds and how to Market with them
- Blogs and Public Relations 2.0
- Corporate Blogging Policies
- Podcasting and your New Media Toolkit

If you have questions, want more information or are interested in either a workshop for your team or talking about how a Business Blog might benefit your company, then please contact me at:

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