

Enterprising companies are blogging for business

By Bruce A. Love

*A*s a small business owner, I am always interested in finding innovative ways to attract new clients. Such efforts typically involve a variety of marketing activities. Lately, I have been considering the use of web logs (blogs) to help promote business. It is important to implement this strategy carefully to avoid disastrous results.

Blogs have been around for a number of years, but they have only recently gained popularity with the growing masses of technology-savvy Internet users. Blogs come in a variety of forms and serve a wide range of purposes. Some are personal online journals or diaries that individuals post for the entire world to see and comment on. Others are highly political, and push liberal or conservative agendas. Blogs also are starting to be used by businesses to quickly distribute important information to customers, collect feedback, or perform damage control to offset negative publicity about a company's products or services.

Last fall, I wrote about blogs for the first time (see "Politics has gone to the blogs" on the Articles page of my Web site – www.loveconsulting.com). Political blogs are as active as ever, and are on the frontlines of battles between politically opposing views (see littlegreenfootballs.com and dailykos.com to see how opposite ends of the political spectrum spin the same news stories). Blogs often break news before any other news media. Maybe this is because so many people have access to the Internet and can contribute their views and opinions of events as they unfold (no need to wait for a reporter). The delay in mainstream media reporting may also be due to the fact that established news media waits to corroborate stories before distributing them to the public. This, theoretically, makes mainstream media stories somewhat more reliable than those reported and discussed in the blogosphere (they have the blessing of an editor who is held accountable for content published or broadcast by his or her news agency).

Many enterprising companies are finding that blogs can be a powerful force in promoting their products. Most, however, are taking a wait-and-see approach regarding blogging as a means of marketing. After observing some blogs in action, I can understand the hesitation to use this new media. The dialog in an unmoderated or weak blog can go in unanticipated directions. I have seen more than one company shut down their blogs when the "wrong message" was getting more exposure than the ones endorsed by the company.

A dissatisfied customer, or a rival posting comments as a customer, can introduce negative attitudes toward a company's products. Such people are referred to as "trolls" in the blogosphere. It is said that a blog hasn't truly "arrived" until it has its own trolls. In an unmoderated blog that has strong customer support, trolls making disparaging comments, are verbally assaulted and discredited by other bloggers, and the reputation of the company is preserved. Such attacks can even elevate the reputation of the company in the eyes of the public, as customers see more persuasive posts by supportive bloggers defending a product.

It takes a skilled and knowledgeable moderator to artfully craft a blog that will disseminate information in such a way as to represent the organization's best interests without sounding like an infomercial. In addition to having a good command of the English language, blogmasters must know and respect the corporate mission and strategies, and have complete access to top management in order to promote the interests of the organization effectively. Blogmasters should also work closely with the organization's public relations department.

Blogs will not replace the need for other marketing techniques. They are just another tool in the arsenal of the skilled marketing professional. In the hands of an unskilled blogmaster, blogs can produce disastrous results that can harm an organization. It is best to use this new marketing tool with care.

My concern in launching a business blog is not that I would have trolls (I can handle those), but that it might have very few contributing bloggers. The lack of evident blogging activity would create an impression that the business had no customer following, and subsequently would not be viewed as a "real" business. For the time being, I plan to ease into business blogging by posting to other established blogs, and occasionally place links in those posts to my company Web site. By tactfully introducing links when blogging topics seem appropriate, I would avoid being accused of "pimping" my Web site (a term used in the blogosphere). By using this approach, a company can test the blogging waters without the risk associated with a hostile or non-existent blogging audience.

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