

This blog's for you

A Canadian company uses a popular medium to do some market research about enterprise IT issues. Microsoft and others discuss their strategies for reaching the right audience

Beauty and the blog

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by Grant Buckler



The comic strip Zits has recently been poking fun at the world of blogging, with teenage Jeremy's parents afraid to open their mouths at the dinner table for fear of finding their conversation reported on their son's blog. The impression the strip gives of blogs - essentially self-absorbed compilations of trivia about daily lives that aren't very interesting - is an accurate picture of some online diaries.

But there are also blogs that offer intelligent comment and inside information - sometimes significant news that the established media haven't yet reported. There are almost as many kinds of blogs as there are kinds of people.

There's no shortage of blogs offering news and comment about information technology. After all, blogs themselves are a new technology, so it's only natural that technology people would be among the first to embrace them. Industry analysts, technology journalists, even technology vendor executives operate their own blogs. Some are good sources of information and ideas about technology.

But can a blog also be an information exchange - a way for people who deal with technology to toss ideas around, share information, maybe even learn more about what customers and end users care about?

One attempt to do something like this comes from what seems at first to be an unlikely source: a man who says he finds blogs "very, very boring."

Richard Jenkins is chief executive of [Performedia International](#), a Vancouver company that does soft-sell marketing of technology by publishing materials designed to explain technologies - concepts like service-oriented architecture, for instance - to senior non-IT executives. Last week Performedia launched Executive Graffiti, a sort of cross between a blog and an online market research survey.

Jenkins says his goal is to learn what the executives who are Performedia's target market really think about technology questions like whether technology companies use too much jargon and how Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software is changing business processes. His approach is to post a few simple questions and encourage responses. Unlike most market surveys, participants will be able to see what their peers are saying. Performedia will collate the responses and use the information to advise its clients.

Whether this really qualifies as a blog is an open question. Jeremy Wright, president of [B5 Media](#) in St. Stephen, N.B., says the site looks "a little bit like a blog" so far. Executive Graffiti does seem to show how ideas taken from blogging can change the way companies like Performedia gather public opinion. In his book *Blog Marketing*, Wright advises businesses to use blogs to find out what their customers think about them and their products, and he says Executive Graffiti seems to be doing much the same thing, though he adds that the anecdotal feedback from blogs is not a substitute for more formal market research.

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[Microsoft Canada Co.](#) decided last year that its Technet support team had too many individual blogs. So the company decided to consolidate them into two - one aimed at IT professionals and the other at IT managers - and supplement the technical information about Microsoft products with other material of general interest to those audiences.

Barnaby Jeans, IT Pro advisor at Microsoft Canada and one of the resident bloggers on the [Canadian IT Managers](#) blog, says he believes it is one of the first to focus on IT from a wider perspective, and its target audience has shown a good deal of interest. "We're getting more comments and more responses than we have individual posts," he says.

These blogs are not taking over the role played by news groups and earlier by bulletin-board systems, though. In those forums, anyone with a question or comment can start a new topic, making them a good forum for seeking answers from peers. The blogs are a little more top-down: on Executive Graffiti and the Canadian IT Managers blog, it is Jenkins and Jeans and his co-resident bloggers who start the discussions.

"It's a different metaphor," Wright says. News groups focus more on simple information exchange - "someone asks a question, someone answers." Blogs contain more opinion, and posts tend to be longer and more carefully constructed.

Richard Giles, director of [Clique Communications](#) in Perth, Australia, says a good way for businesses to approach blogging is to try to create resources for the industries they serve. Giles, whose company advises clients on electronic communications, says corporate blogs that just promote a company's products or services won't fly, but blogs that provide generally useful information to a certain group of people can work.

On the other hand, in a current survey of ITBusiness.ca readers' opinions about corporate blogs, just over half of 400 respondents say the term "corporate blog" is an oxymoron. Ventures like Executive Graffiti and the Canadian IT Managers blog seem to be trying to be something other than corporate blogs. If they can find the right approach, such efforts might produce some useful new ways for people who work with technology to share information and ideas.

Comment: info@itbusiness.ca

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