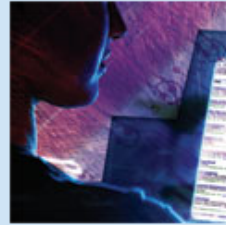


Corporations enter a new frontier

Companies are increasingly turning to the blogosphere to drive traffic to their Web site - but they need to be careful about how they word things

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by Grant Buckler



(photo s.min)

Vancouver-based Communicate.com runs a network of e-commerce sites on the Web. The six-year-old, publicly traded company wanted to build its profile and communicate with investors. So last September Adam Rabiner, its communications director, started a blog.



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Investors increasingly go online to research companies, Rabiner says, so a blog is a good way to reach them. And sometimes it even helps Communicate get press coverage.

On the first day Rabiner's blog was online it attracted five visitors. The first couple of weeks were frustrating. "I felt like I was talking to myself," he says now. But by spring, the Communicate blog was attracting a couple of hundred unique visitors every day, and Rabiner says it's definitely helping his company's profile.

"It's a good way to get information across," he says, and "it really puts a human face on us."

No PR-speak

In the past few years the Internet has become more about sharing and building communities, says Richard Giles, director of Clique Communications, a Perth, Australia, firm that advises clients on online activities. "The businesses that understand that that's what the Internet today is about are the ones that are finding it easier to use it as a business tool," he says.

"The future of the company is about community and community engagement," says Stephen Ibaraki, co-host of the Canadian IT Manager's Forum operated by the Canadian Information Processing Society (CIPS) and Microsoft Canada Co. "Products and services are not as key today as they were in the past. A lot of what's key today is the customer experience."

There are right and wrong ways to do corporate blogs, though. The cardinal rule is to be genuine. Corporate blogs that read like product brochures, or worse, that try - as a few have - to disguise marketing messages put together by the company as genuine comments from outside sources, risk alienating customers. "People pick up on that very quickly," Giles says.

Ibaraki agrees. "Customers actually can identify marketing-speak and PR-speak." To be believed, a corporate blog must be honest and present information in a "personal voice."

A wide range of topics

Rabiner posts information about Communicate.com, but doesn't limit his blog to that. "There are some things that I find that are more interesting than what's going on here," he says. He blogs about domain-name registration rules, e-commerce surveys and Internet advertising alongside posts about his company's latest financial results. "It is, I guess, a bit promotional," he admits, "but it is what it is - there's no hidden agenda there."

Alec Saunders is chief executive at lotum Corp., an Ottawa company whose software helps people manage their phone calls. He started his personal blog while between jobs before launching lotum. While he mentions his company online, Saunders blogs about everything from technology trends to politics. Even though the blog rarely promotes lotum, Saunders says, "it drives quite a bit of traffic back over to the lotum Web site."

Draw attention

When a friend who heads another technology startup asked him about the value of blogging, Saunders says, he suggested comparing the traffic on their respective Web sites. The other company is about the same age as lotum and has an innovative product, says Saunders, but “my traffic was 10 times the traffic that he had.”

Giles says he recently advised an Australian client in the building project management business to launch a blog. “There isn’t really anywhere on the Internet that discusses project management in Australia online,” he says. The client can fill that gap and draw attention to itself at the same time.

The key is to provide value related to what your company does, Ibaraki says. For instance, an auto manufacturer’s blog could advise on service issues, a food producer could include recipes, a building supplies or hardware retailer might give advice on home renovations. “Anything that adds value,” Ibaraki says. “Anything that will resonate with your audience.”

There are some things you can’t post on a blog. Rabiner says he is very careful about “material information” that could get him in trouble with securities regulators. Financial results can’t go on the blog until after they have been released through the proper channels.

Don’t cross boundaries

Business bloggers need to beware of disclosing confidential information, of breaking securities laws and of liability for libel, slander, obscenity or harassment, says Ariane Siegel, partner at law firm Gowling Lafleur Henderson LLP in Toronto. She warns that boundaries aren’t always easy to define. A company executive mentioning a trip to a certain city, for instance, might be tipping off competitors to acquisition talks. What seems like a harmless comment might not be taken that way. But, Siegel says, “you have to balance the risks and the positive aspects.”

Some control of what appears on a corporate blog is essential, says Ibaraki, but “you don’t want to have too heavy a hand, because if you have too heavy a hand you’re going to lose any credibility associated with that blog.”

Not all corporate blogs are for public consumption. Jeremy Wright, president of blog network B5Media and New Brunswick-based author of the 2005 book *Blog Marketing*, says Intel Corp. engineers use blogs to share ideas, for instance. General Motors Corp. has an internal blog for employee complaints.

Technologically speaking, starting a blog is fairly easy. A number of services will run blogs for you at reasonable cost. Saunders says he pays Bluehost Inc. of Orem, Utah, \$8 per month to host his blog. He uses WordPress open-source blogging software to maintain the blog. “I think the technology piece of it is trivial,” Saunders says.

Communicate.com hosts Rabiner’s blog on its own servers and uses open-source blogging software called Serendipity. Rabiner says it took him about a day to learn to use the software and get his blog started. Someone with no technical knowledge would probably need help, he says.

Put some meat on the bone

The bigger challenge for a novice is not the technology but learning how to be a blogger, Saunders says.

“My biggest suggestion,” Wright says, “is to not write a blog at first.” He advises would-be bloggers to start by reading others’ blogs to get a feel for the way blogs are done. Saunders echoes that advice, adding that the next step should be to post comments to those other blogs - something bloggers appreciate and that helps newcomers further develop their feel for how to blog.

Saunders says one of the keys to a blog’s success is keeping it fresh. On his own blog, he tries to write two or three items every morning. “You’ve got to put some meat on the bones. You’ve got to give people something to read and think about.”

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