

Marketing And Blogs: What Works

James L. Horton

A journalist asked me recently whether blogs could be used successfully for marketing. I said they could but hard selling in a blog won't work, and hawking story ideas to bloggers might be dubious. So what does work? That started a search to see if a hunch was correct. And, it is.

Successful marketing through blogs creates or enters a community of interest where readers are involved in the use and lifestyle of a product or service. Blogging sparks interactive communications using low-cost self-publishing and syndication of content. It is not a way to make money or sell products. Blogwriters who believe they can sell musings by subscription have been disappointed, and companies that have used blogs to sell overtly have so far failed and generated protest.

Many blogs

There are millions of blogs – literally. Most have no commercial, social or cultural value beyond individual expression, most often of a teen-age girl who updates her friends on her life about two times a month. This is the conclusion of a research firm that studied blogs in 2003.

(http://www.perseusdevelopment.com/corporate/news_shell.php?record=51)

Perseus Development Corp. randomly surveyed 3,634 blogs on eight blog-hosting services - Blog-City, BlogSpot, Diaryland, LiveJournal, Pitas, TypePad, Weblogger and Xanga. From this, it estimated that 4.12 million blogs have been created. (The study was not definitive because many blogs are not on blog hosting services.)

On the eight services examined, the firm estimated that a total of five million blogs would be in existence by the end of 2003. It is not surprising (to a blogger, anyway) that most blogs were rarely updated. A total of 66.0% of surveyed blogs had not been updated in two months and 1.09 million blogs had no postings on subsequent days. Active blogs were updated on average every 14 days. Only 106,579 of the hosted blogs were updated at least once a week and fewer than 50,000 were updated daily. And, as one might expect, the firm reported, "Blogs are currently the province of the young, with 92.4% of blogs created by people under the age of 30."

Blogs with marketing and commercial potential should be different from the description above. They should be deliberate efforts undertaken with a

commitment to communicate. They should be focused sharply on relevant topics to customers, employees, owners and others. They should seek to converse with interest groups to which they are directed. Otherwise, few readers will take the time to open them.

Marketing blogs that work

In May 2002, Macromedia, Inc., a firm that develops software tools to create Web sites, was about to issue a new release of its Macromedia MX product. According to Ed Krimen, then the VP of the Developer Community, Macromedia's community managers who handle relationships with Web developers, suggested the firm use blogs to communicate. So, the firm tried it and to general amazement, the blogs took off. (See http://www.macromedia.com/devnet/logged_in/ekrimen_blogs.html for the full story.) Some of the blogs are still running and should be examined for topics they discuss. Here is a list.

- Mike Chambers (Flash MX): <http://radio.weblogs.com/0106797/>
- Matt Brown (Dreamweaver MX): <http://radio.weblogs.com/0106884/>
- John Dowdell: <http://www.markme.com/jd>
- Sean Corfield (ColdFusion MX, Architecture): <http://www.corfield.org/blog/>

Macromedia's concern was that the blogs ring true, that they get information to customers quickly and that they avoided shilling. The company set only one rule: Keep posts relevant. Other than that, bloggers were left to their own devices. Even so, there was initial concern among Macromedia's customers that the company was using blogs to sell product. The firm alleviated that anxiety, and the blogs remain useful customer information resources.

Another firm that has started a useful blog is MediaMap, the firm that provides information on journalists, industry analysts and editorial calendars. (See <http://customers.mediamap.com/weblog/blogger.asp?plD=undefined>.) What MediaMap has done effectively is to take the results of its daily research into media changes and to post them in a Weblog called "ExpertPR." By doing this, MediaMap bypassed competitors and the old way of notifying PR practitioners of changes through printed newsletter. Further, the blog is a marketing vehicle that shows how the firm stays up-to-the-minute on the media world.

An innovative approach to blogging is being tried at MSN under the guidance of Joan Connell, a senior editor who introduced blogs to MSNBC.com. Connell designed and is launching a promotion for the introduction of **Microsoft Office 2003** that targets managers concerned about their careers. Connell has packaged excerpts from a recently launched book, [*The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers*](#), with a career quiz and a blog all written by the two authors of the book, Jim Citrin and Rick Smith. The blog focuses on career concerns and ties tightly to the messages of the book and quiz. It is a multi-

pronged appeal to a community of interest tied to software tools that help managers do their jobs.

Two questionable marketing blogs

In early 2003, Dr Pepper/Seven Up, Inc. started its launch of a new milk-based product in five flavors targeted at adolescents. Its name is *Raging Cow*. To get “buzz” among the young set, the company co-opted (not hired) six teenage bloggers to whom they offered drink samples and promotional materials. Further, the company said the teenagers did not have to write about the product, and they could say they didn’t like it, if they felt that way.

And, apparently that is how the students treated it. If you look at one of the blogs today (<http://www.sparkley.net/>), you won’t find any mention of *Raging Cow* nor any of the links to the other five bloggers who participated. Overall, it doesn’t appear that the company got much from its effort nor from its own fake blog (<http://blog.ragingcow.com/>), which is not dated so no one can tell if it is current or not. On the other hand, Dr. Pepper/ Seven Up didn’t spend much money in this experiment, and it did generate comment in traditional media, especially since a blogger started a boycott against the effort. Further, the company understood the risk. Todd Copilevitz, director of Dr. Pepper/Seven Up’s marketing agency, Richards Interactive, was quoted as saying, “If you want the steady drumbeat of sell, sell, buy, buy, buy, this is not the forum for you. You do not control message.”

The same lack of effectiveness appears to be true for a blog started (and suspended) for Barbie, the popular Mattel, Inc. doll. (http://www.myscene.com/barbie/barbie_index.asp?playnow=yes) A copywriter somewhere created a gee-whiz, teenage tone and made a few entries then dropped the whole concept. What remains of the idea sits there, waiting to be taken down.

Both of these attempts appear to have dabbled in blogging rather than making a serious commitment to the medium. It is not surprising then that neither worked well. On the other hand, if the firms hatched the idea of blogging solely to generate publicity in mainstream media, they were successful and noticed.

Déjà vu

Blogs have antecedents in PR and marketing and their proper use has precedence as well. In mainstream media, a blog is close to a columnist writing a regular opinion piece. The difference with blogs, however, is that a columnist can write all day long and from anywhere using mobile technologies (hence, the term moblogging.) Immediacy is not important to many bloggers, however, because they don’t stay up with the news. Rather, they lag news and comment on it in their diary/journals.

Journals recounting one's activity and used for personal comment have been well known for hundreds of years. In fact, the first such journal diary published (long after the author's death) was by Samuel Pepys, who lived in late 17th century London, England. In a wonderful updating of history, a web site (<http://www.pepysdiary.com>) is republishing the Pepys Diary in daily entries matched by day and month for the next 10 years. (1 January 1660 was published on 1 January 2003.) However, there is a distinction between Pepys journal and a Weblog. Pepys never intended for his journal to be read by anyone other than himself. A blog, by reason of the medium on which it is written, is public, although with nearly 5 million blogs in existence, an unpromoted blog is effectively semi-private.

A second example of journals kept before blogging is a magazine column published since the beginning of the personal computer revolution in the 1970s. A journalist and science fiction writer has been writing blog-like commentary of his trials and travails with new technologies. Today, it is one of the longest-running columns on personal computing and is called *Computing at Chaos Manor*, still published in the online version of *Byte Magazine*. (<http://www.byte.com/>). The writer, Jerry Pournelle, has been at the task since the 1970s. He recounts what he has been experimenting with, what works and what doesn't, what he has been reading and games he has been playing.

Technology companies have long known how to work with Pournelle and gain exposure through him. They ask him to try their technology and report on it. Pournelle installs a product and relates his hands-on, unfiltered experience. Because he is a facile, accurate writer, he recounts results of experiments such that anyone reading his column knows what to do and to avoid. Of course, an obvious requirement for approaching Pournelle (who builds his own computers) is that one is certain a product works.

Working with columnists like Pournelle continues and technology marketers have transferred their knowledge to bloggers. That is what Nokia's interactive advertising agency did when the Finnish mobile communications manufacturer introduced a new 3650 camera cell phone. The agency gave phones to authors of selected blogs focused on photography with the hope the authors would talk about the product and spread the word about its features and functions. They did.

Why did Nokia's effort work and *Raging Cow* fail? There is a community of interest around photography. There wasn't around a new milk-based beverage. Because teen bloggers were not that interested, they didn't pursue discussion of *Raging Cow* like a photo enthusiast pursues details and workings of a new camera.

What works

There are three ways to approach blogging as a marketer. Write a blog yourself, market through bloggers or advertise on blogs.

The first two approaches rely on:

- A targeted audience
- Credibility
- Reader relevance

It is easier to define the audience you wish to reach if you write your own blog. Theoretically, one has, through customer registrations and other identifiers, a good idea of where customers are and of their interests. Further, as one commentator wrote, there are reasons to have company-sponsored blogging, including:

- Customers learn about your company from an authentic voice whose concern is to help them make money
- If you talk to customers regularly, they tend to think of you first.
- If you build relationships with customers, they tell you more about themselves.
- If customers trust you, there is a better chance they will try your new products and services.
- Salespeople enjoy the process and feel good about being able to be in touch with customers more frequently.

However, this assumes marketers and sales people have the skills and time to blog. Most don't. Worse, some don't have the sensitivity to avoid embarrassing their companies or the care to avoid leaking proprietary information.

Credibility, the second issue, is a point that too few marketers understand, especially marketers trained in advertising where everything is the "finest, best and world-class in quality." To be credible, one must accept that sometimes things are not so good and that there might be products and solutions out there that are better than those you support. One blogs to converse with customers, even angry customers who find that a glitch makes it hard for them to use the product or service. This is why hyping products in a blog is ineffective marketing. If a reader thinks a blogger is not honest, the reader treats the blog like advertising copy and argues with it or ignores it.

The measure of how difficult it is for marketers to understand the need for dialogue rather than selling are the rafts of newsletters still emanating from marketing departments with glowing stories about new products and advertising copy masquerading as news. One can use a blog that way, but unlike a

newsletter that reaches an e-mail box, a user must click to a blog. Readers must want to keep up with it. This is why blogs might not supplant e-mail as a more manageable form of customer communication.

The reason readers click to a blog in the first place then return is relevant information. The blog tells readers something they need or want to know. This is why blogging can work in customer service. The customer owns the product or uses the service and hence, has a relationship with it and the company. In marketing parlance, blogging is reinforcement and not selling. It can extend to a customer's information gathering in the sales process but it should not enter the realm of hype. The hard task of relevance is maintaining interest. This presumes a flow of useful or attention-getting information and it is here where bloggers often fail. After an initial burst of entries, they find they have little to say -- hence, the number of blogs that die aborning.

Pitching and advertising

Marketing through other bloggers has two approaches -- presenting story ideas under the assumption that bloggers will write about them, or advertising. Story pitching is useful in areas of intense interest to bloggers. For example, bloggers following political campaigns will report rumors that might not otherwise reach conventional reporters. But will a political blogger want to hear a lobbyist's pitch on behalf of a company's proposed tax break?

However, an advantage of marketing through bloggers is their continuing and independent interest in a topic. The failure of Pepsi/Seven Up was trying to graft a product onto teen sites that did not focus on the product or even a food category. It was too soon. *Raging Cow* needed to be established with bloggers before asking them to talk about it. Another difficulty is gauging whether it is worth the effort to interest independent bloggers in writing about a topic. There is no authoritative source to get an accurate description of a blogger's audience demographics.

There has been limited advertising on blogs to date and there is good reason for that. Blogs have low or undefined circulation. On the other hand, people are trying them out to see how they work. John Kerry, a presidential candidate, ran his ads on at least four sites. There is little risk in doing so from a cost point-of-view because blogs are inexpensive. They have the lowest overhead of any medium. On the other hand, from a reputation point of view and from a cost-effectiveness point of view they might be -- and probably are -- expensive. The reputation danger is the greatest. It would look silly and misinformed for an ad to run on a site that attacks the company paying for the ad. On the other hand, a blogger is not likely to bite a hand that feeds it. Still, at least one concerned blogger has stated an advertising policy.

(See <http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/002152>).

There is also a somewhat “wacky” effort to build circulation on blogs through sweepstakes promotions like newspapers have done for more than a century, but it is unclear this will make a difference in readership. (See Blogstakes. <http://www.blogstakes.com>)

A decision process

So how does one decide whether to use blogs for marketing? Follow a process.

Start with blogs in existence. There are tens of thousands, and there is a chance that a blog somewhere covers the topic you wish to discuss. But how do you find what is out there? Consult indices like:

- <http://portal.eatonweb.com> a portal that tracks over 14,000 blogs.
- <http://www.waypath.com> a contextual search of more than 950,000 blogs
- <http://www.lights.com/weblogs/directories.html> A directory of blog directories.
- <http://blogdex.net>, a research project of the MIT Media Laboratory tracking the diffusion of information through the weblog community.

The second step is to examine blogs covering your topic area to see how frequently the writer is posting. Don't bother with any blog where a writer posts less than twice a week. Frequency is important. To get people to return, there must be something new for them to read. One must build a habit in the blog reader of looking for something new and interesting. Once the habit is instilled, one must feed it. Blogging is not a newspaper delivered to your door seven days a week. It is a newspaper bought at a news stand, if the fancy hits you. The one exception to this description is RSS software (Really Simple Syndication) that automatically feeds new blog entries to you like a wire service. (For an example of an RSS service that does this, see Bloglines: <http://www.bloglines.com/>) But for someone to activate RSS requires a conviction that it is worth doing.

The third step is to determine who is reading blogs that cover the subject matter in which you are interested. As we noted, this is difficult. But there are ways to track how blogs link to one another to get an idea who is paying attention. Cross-linking is an aspect of blogging that doesn't have an equivalent in any but online media. Bloggers learned from the beginning to talk to each other through linking to each other's text and through keeping other's sites listed on their own. Technorati (<http://www.technorati.com>) exploited these relationships by tracking the linkages through the “blogosphere” and listing them by URL. While this is hardly perfect, it is better than not knowing at all.

The fourth step is to determine by examining the blogger's entries whether the blogger would be amenable to an outside approach. A first question to ask is how the blogger writes about your company, products and services. If the blogger seems objective to enthusiastic, it is worth an approach. Consider, for

example, Gizmodo (<http://gizmodo.com/>). It bills itself as “The gadgets weblog,” but the site is news-oriented and has many press releases announcing new products. Gizmodo is an ideal target for consumer technology products.

Having done your research, ask whether your product or service is applicable to blogging and whether it is worth marketing through bloggers. You should have a good feel for targeted blogs and you should know whether the interests of your community could be addressed through a blog. If the answer is that a blog could work but there is no appropriate blogger to approach, you face the task of developing and marketing your own blog. But, there are several considerations in starting your own marketing blog:

1. **Who will write it?** This is not an easy answer. A blogger must have a desire to write, the discipline to write regularly, something to write about and a style that is at least clear and easy to read. This is less common than one might think.
2. **Where will that person be located?** Location is important because the individual must be near or in an information flow. Presumably the blogger is bringing insight and news to a target audience, so the blogger must be somewhere that insight and news is achievable. The blogger might be someone who uses the product or service skillfully and relates his or her experience with the product or service. The blogger might be in-the-know about the company’s marketing efforts and product strategies and can relate, without revealing confidential information, what the company is planning to do. The blogger might be assiduous about collecting information about the product or service and publishing it. The blogger must have something daily to add to the reader’s desire for information.
3. **To whom will the blogger report?** Few companies allow – or can permit -- a blogger to say anything without controls and rules. There must be blogging policies – what can be talked about and what must be avoided. There must be a person who supervises the blogger – i.e., regularly reads what the blogger has to say and intervenes if the blogger violates the rules. There might even be a need for a blog editor who peruses copy before it is posted. (This last suggestion is a cause for protest among bloggers who believe they should be able to write without any censorship.) Supervision of blogging may be loose or tightly controlled. It is up to the company and to the blogger. But, to fail to supervise is a ticket for trouble. If a blogger works for a company, the blogger should know there are repercussions for failing to follow company rules. That is why when Microsoft fired a blogger who had posted an unauthorized picture on his personal blog, the company was within its rights. There are security policies at Microsoft and the blogger had violated them.

4. **How will the blog be marketed?** Why write a blog if there are no readers? There are reasons to keep a semi-private blog of activities as a way of reminding yourself what you have been doing and to develop ideas and opinions, but not in marketing. Once a blog is launched, one should use conventional means – press releases, e-mail, Web links, etc.-- to let target audiences know it is up, what it will focus on and why the target audience should be interested in reading it regularly. One should track traffic to the blog and be aggressive in conversing with readers. Some blogs have links for comments below each story. Other blogs do not have online posting of commentary but will post e-mails if relevant. Either way, the blogger has to push to remain in touch with readers.

Not for everyone

Blogging is not for everyone, and it is certainly not a marketing medium for every corporation. But there are marketing uses for blogging that should be employed more often than they have been to date. Early leaders in blogging have experimented with what works and what doesn't. It would be a pity if other marketers failed to learn from their tests.

Perhaps the most important point to remember is that a blogger must keep the audience coming back. No one forces readers to go to a blog or to pay attention to what a blogger writes. Successful blogging for marketing purposes is easier said than done.

#

James L. Horton is the founder of online-pr.com and has been in public relations for more than 25 years.