

A Look at Corporate Blogs - 2007

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It is risky to write about corporate blogs. They change by the day and their purposes may not always be clear. Some have regular postings, others are irregular, and still others are stillborn. But, we're going to take that risk in order to find out what corporate blogs can tell one from a PR perspective at this stage in their maturation. We have focused deliberately on large organizations and on blogs sponsored by a corporation or written by senior corporate executives. Our selected samples were taken from Constantin Basturea's New PR Wiki.

<http://www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php/Main/HomePage>

One fact became clear during the mini-survey. Some organizations know what to do with blogging and are deeply involved in them. Other organizations are stumbling. They have half-hearted attempts that are often out-of-date, excessively promotional and uninteresting. Still other organizations are somewhere in the middle. Sun Microsystems, for example, has an active CEO blogger, but some other executives post rarely. The overall impression is one of inconsistency. There is no apparent trend among companies that use blogging well compared to those that don't, nor does there appear to be a trend that indicates blogging is better for some industries rather than others. However, there are lessons from reading through corporate blogs that PR practitioners might find useful.

- **Strategy.** There should be a defined strategy for a corporate blog tied to a corporation's positioning and to reader interest. This did not always appear to be the case in the blogs examined. Some corporate blogs appeared to be the result of a bloggers' personal interests loosely affiliated with their firms. Even though blogs are personal expression, a blog sponsored by a corporation on a corporation's web page carries the corporation's credibility with it. A company should use a blog to gain differentiation and advantage, if possible. Some of the blogs examined did that, such as Dell and SAP. These blogs were distinguished by addressing topics of direct interest to customers.
- **Statement of purpose.** The purpose of the blog should be stated up front, so readers know what the blog is about. Few of the corporate blogs examined did this. Statements of purpose were often buried in the "about" section or not given at all.

- **Readership.** Corporate bloggers should define readership and focus on serving those readers' interests. Few blogs can be all things to all readers. It is better to go into depth for a targeted group to build credibility with them. This means PR practitioners should help segment audiences when advising would-be corporate bloggers. The corollary of this approach is that the totality of corporate blogs ideally should reach the totality of audiences to whom a corporation communicates. However, this is hardly possible because there is a limit to the number of employees who wish to blog and topics they wish to blog about.
- **Blogging rules.** There should be defined rules for blogging to keep the blogger and the corporation out of trouble – what may be commented on and what avoided. Rules should not be so restrictive as to discourage blogging. (Even corporate blogs are largely voluntary and personal expression.) If a corporation assigns an individual to blog, it may impose more control on content. Most blogs examined did not define blogging rules. There is always a risk of a blogger going too far, and there have been reported instances where it has happened. None of the blogs examined for this essay appeared to stray over a line of propriety or confidential corporate information.
- **Commitment:** Corporate blogs require commitment to regular posting. This commitment is not easy to make, especially for busy executives. Ask a would-be blogger if the individual is ready to post several times a week. If not, discourage blogging.
- **Customer service blogs:** Several blogs dealt with customer service issues and were effective in doing so. There is immediate need for blogging in customer service, and companies that recognize the need are well positioned.
- **Editing.** Shorter entries are better than long. Some bloggers have mastered this, but others write screeds. Some corporate blogs have editors, which is a good idea to keep a consistency of tone and topic. One function of an editor should be to cut away marketing hype and keep a conversational tone to postings.
- **Purging.** If a blog hasn't been updated in months, get rid of it. An out-of-date blog leaves the impression that of an individual and/or company doesn't care enough to carry on a conversation. It is better not to blog at all and not to take corporate web site space.
- **Frequency.** If a blog is active, there is still an issue of frequency. Posting every two to three days is a minimum to sustain interest. Some bloggers posted about three times a month – hardly enough.

- **Comments:** Comments are a good indicator of the size and interest of blog readership. Comments, however, must be moderated to keep inappropriate remarks off a corporate web page/blog. A few of the blogs examined had a healthy stream of comments per posting. Most did not. Large consumer brands have a greater chance of sparking conversation than BtoB and narrowly targeted businesses.
- **Content:** Blogs devour content, and it is hard to keep them supplied with fresh material. For that reason, it is better to have several contributors to a blog than one person. This means finding and cultivating active posters, a challenging task in itself.

Here then are brief comments on 15 corporations' approaches to blogging.

- **Accenture.** (http://www.accenture.com/Global/Research_and_Insights/Accenture_Blogs/) Befitting a consulting firm, Accenture has several corporate blogs – six at the time of writing that covered a range of technology and career-related areas. The statement of purpose for the blogs was clear. *Our blogs feature thought leadership on a wide range of business issues, with a particular focus on helping companies achieve high performance. Here you'll also find blogs about emerging technologies and career experiences from select employees.* Entries were sporadic but lengthy, informative, sometimes technical and sometimes chatty. However, for a high-tech consulting company of the size and importance of Accenture, the small number of blogs is a disappointment.
- **Boeing.** “Randy’s blog” (<http://boeingblogs.com/randy/>) This blog comes from Boeing’s vice president of marketing for commercial airlines, and it is focused on the airline industry and Boeing activities. The blog’s stated objective is clear. *Appointed vice president, marketing in April 2007, Randy T. is continuing to spread the word around the globe about Boeing’s outstanding products and world-class services. A big part of the job involves understanding and communicating market requirements and the market outlook, and supporting market positioning and sales activities.* His blog is a direct extension of his marketing communications work. Postings to the blog are irregular, and there were no archives when it was examined. Blog entries were informative and not too sales driven. There were a healthy number of comments for each entry.
- **Dell.** Direct2Dell. (<http://direct2dell.com/one2one/default.aspx>). This blog supports customer service, although there is no statement of purpose on the blog site. Posting archives are broken into topics from

battery recall through XPS 700 Motherboard exchange program rather than into dates. This is especially helpful for customers researching issues. Entries are informative and honest, especially about Dell's customer service problems. There are multiple authors of the blog from different departments at Dell, but one blogger seemed to carry the weight of entries. Comments are consistent, if light, for most postings. However, a particularly popular posting such as Dell's commitment to Linux generated a heavy response.

- **Delta Airlines.** (<http://blog.delta.com/>) Middle managers at Delta write this blog. It has a clear statement of intent. *The Delta blog will take you under the wing and behind the scenes sharing stories on ideas, changes, our people, and their working lives.* Posts examined provoked a surprising amount of comment, both positive and negative. Some sparked dozens of replies from travelers, critics and fans. If one purpose of a blog is to spark conversation with customers, then Delta appears to have a successful effort.
- **General Motors.** Fastlane Blog (<http://fastlane.gmblogs.com/>) Bob Lutz who heads design at GM started this blog in January 2005, which makes it one of the early corporate blogs. It features entries from a number of company executives, and it has a blog editor who also posts. Entries are product-oriented, and marketing is not far below the surface. From the beginning, the blog was used to get wider distribution of Lutz's speeches, and Lutz uses it to publish observations on the auto industry and auto design. Entries are informative and comments are plentiful indicating a healthy readership. The blog's statement of purpose was hard to find, but it was clear. *GM's FastLane blog is a forum for GM executives to talk about GM's current and future products and services, although non-executives sometimes appear here to discuss the development and design of important products. On occasion, FastLane can be utilized to discuss other important issues facing the company.* The blog also has a clearly stated blogger policy:
 1. *We will tell the truth. We will acknowledge and correct any mistakes promptly.*
 2. *We will not delete comments unless they are spam, off-topic, or defamatory.*
 3. *We will reply to comments when appropriate as promptly as possible.*
 4. *We will link to online references and original source materials directly*
 5. *We will disagree with other opinions respectfully.*

- **Google.** The official Google blog (<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/>) is one of more than 60 blogs in multiple languages that Google supports, most of which focus on Google services. The official blog is written by various engineers and managers, and its statement of purpose is in its headline, *Insights from Googlers into our products, technology and the Google culture.* The blog is a mix of hard and soft news and informative insights. There are no comments. Postings tend to be long. The blog is a working tool and promotional effort for Google, and archives are filed by topic.
- **Johnson & Johnson.** (<http://www.jnjbw.com/>) This blog defines itself well. *There are more than 120,000 people who work for Johnson & Johnson and its operating companies. We're some of them, and through JNJ BTW, we will try to find a voice that often gets lost in formal communications.* The blog editor is a former wire service reporter who works in J&J's corporate communications department. He also writes most of the entries, which are broader in focus than the Delta blog but often interesting. A significant number of entries are in response to news events and not to what J&J is doing as a company. There are few comments – rarely more than one or two - for any given entry. Although the blogger said he wanted to interview more individuals within the company, there weren't many entries that indicated he had done so. The blog lists several contributors, but postings appear to indicate one person is largely carrying the effort.
- **Microsoft.** Microsoft supports hundreds of blogs. (<http://www.microsoft.com/communities/blogs/PortalHome.aspx>) Most are directly related to Microsoft products and services, and many of the entries are highly technical. Microsoft's statement of purpose for the blogs is broad. *These blogs will provide you insights and opinions about using Microsoft technologies and software.* Microsoft has a blogging portal that allows readers to search blogs by keyword. It is clear Microsoft is striving to maintain close ties to customers through blogging.
- **New York Stock Exchange.** (<http://exchanges.nyse.com/>) Although the blog shows five authors, it appears that one blogger is carrying most of the weight. Postings are frequent but not daily. Comments are sparse. The blog is chatty but focused mostly on the business of the exchange. Its statement of purpose is clear. *Exchanges is a blog about the markets, products and services of NYSE Euronext, the world's largest exchange group. Our goal is to share information and insights, and to have you share yours.* The blog also has a well-stated comment policy. *We may edit comments for length, foul language, grammar, personal attacks or other reasons. We allow anonymous or pseudonymous*

comments, although we prefer signed comments, which we believe carry more weight in the online conversation. We also do our best to answer questions and respond to comments, within the constraints of the fact that blogging is not a full-time gig for any of us.

- **Oracle.** Oracle supported 18 executive blogs at the time of writing. (<http://www.oracle.com/corporate/executive/blog/index.html>). Its statement of purpose for them was broad. *News and opinion from the visionaries who are driving Oracle Fusion.* A quick scan showed at least four of the blogs were months out of date, or effectively, abandoned. Postings tended to be technical and directed at Oracle's customers. It would be easy to conclude that Oracle's executives were not convinced about blogging.
- **Pitney Bowes.** Interestingly, Pitney Bowes' executive chairman is a blogger under his own name and not that of the corporation (<http://www.mikecritelli.com/>) It appears that the corporation may want to keep a distance. The blog's disclaimer reinforces this point. *This is Mike Critelli's blog. The views and statements expressed herein are those of Mike Critelli and, in the case of a comment, those of the person who submits such comment, and not necessarily those of Pitney Bowes Inc.* While there is no statement of purpose, Mr. Critelli provides a long bio that details his interest and his career. Mr. Critelli is a regular poster of lengthy entries arguing for his points of view and a thoughtful commentator. He files postings both by time and by topic.
- **PriceWaterhouseCoopers.** This global accounting firm titles its blog page "PwC UK blogs." (<http://pwc.blogs.com>) Oddly, no other countries are represented. There were five blogs in all at the time of writing – three devoted to technical matters and two to human resources and recruitment. There was no statement of purpose for the blogs. A scan of individual blogs showed that posting and comments were light in the corporate reporting blog – about twice a month. The finance and treasury blog had posting gaps months apart. A blog devoted to international financial reporting had postings of three times a month. The two blogs devoted to human resources and career issues were similarly light in postings and comments. Based on this, it did not appear that PWC UK was invested in or convinced about blogging at the time of writing.
- **SAP.** This software giant is a heavy blog user and its aggregation page is full of postings on a wide variety of topics. (<https://www.sdn.sap.com/irj/sdn/weblogs>) While many postings were about promotional activities of SAP developers, such as attending conferences, as many were about technical topics. One day alone had

11 different postings aggregated from 11 blogs. A reader of the aggregation page could quickly gain a feeling for the activities in which SAP is engaged. SAP files postings in several ways – by date, by topic, by top posts, active bloggers and podcasts.

- **Sun Microsystems.** This hardware firm features seven executive and news blogs on its corporate page (<http://www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/blogs/index.jsp>) There is no statement of purpose for the blogs. One is written by Sun's CEO, an active blogger, who posts at length every few days. His topics are usually company-oriented but thoughtful. Sun's technology executive was an infrequent poster at the time of writing with more than a month between postings. The head of software was even less frequent with more than two months from the last posting. Surprisingly, Sun's general counsel was an active poster – several times a month – and his lengthy commentary included both technical legal issues and personal reflections. Sun's vice president of Eco Responsibility also was an active poster who discussed such issues as carbon footprints. As one might expect, Sun's news blog had daily entries, while its reviews blog was nearly daily in its postings. It appeared that Sun is on the road to blogging but not there yet.
- **Yahoo.** (<http://yodel.yahoo.com/>) This blog appears to have been in existence since August, 2006. From the beginning, a range of individuals have posted to it, including Yahoo's CEO who generated the most comments. Oddly, there weren't many comments to most of the posts examined, which throws into question the relationship between the size of a consumer brand and the amount of conversation with it. The site states its purpose well. *We'll provide insights into our company, our people, our culture, and the things that occupy our minds. We'll cover emerging trends, provide some behind-the-scenes commentary, profile interesting Yahoos, spotlight our beloved users, reveal some of our quirks, tap into guest bloggers, sprinkle in some videos, podcasts and photo essays, and generally think out loud (lucky you... you get to listen). Sure, we'll touch on news, but we'll try to provide a new twist on things to make every visit worth your while.*

Summary

Blogging requires dedication to do well. Some companies have taken to it: Others haven't and never will. From a public relations perspective, blogging should be strategic with a clear purpose for the existence of each blog. Blogs, although largely voluntary, ideally should be coordinated to present a broad picture of an organization, its activities and issues. However, coordination may be an insuperable challenge for PR practitioners because

some departments will have no one who is interested in blogging, while others may have several. From the brief review of the blogs above, few, if any, of the corporations had achieved broad transparency, although some such as Microsoft, Google and SAP appeared to have come close.

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