



Corporate Weblogging Best Practices

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A guide for enterprises seeking to leverage corporate blogs.

SUMMARY

Weblogging, also known as blogging, is an online phenomena providing the opportunity for employees at all levels of an organization to communicate with each other and to form communities around products, projects, and similar interests. As the technology has matured, many examples of successful blog implementations have surfaced and best practices have evolved. Likewise, several missteps have been made along the way which serve as learning opportunities.

This paper describes the different types of corporate blogs and their applications; lists best practices for running one's own corporate blog and for managing how your company is represented on others' blogs; examines case studies exploring successful and unsuccessful corporate blogging attempts; and contains a glossary of specialized terms found in the blogging community.

This paper is intended for various audiences including executives faced with the decision of whether or not to implement blogging at their company, human resources professionals who will need to handle blogging-related incidents involving company employees, and marketers looking for ways to leverage blogs without damaging the organization's credibility in the fickle "blogosphere."

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WHAT IS A BLOG?

A blog is a Web site which is continually updated as a personal diary, collaboration space, news outlet, collection of links, or memos to the world. Almost anything can go into a blog, including: text, links, pictures, audio, video, and more.

Blogs find their earliest roots in newsgroups and Internet forums where people could post messages and engage in conversations. The ability for anyone to initiate and join these conversations, regardless of their expertise, fostered a community that, while usually friendly, was cynical and accepted little at face value.

These online bulletin board applications evolved into personal web pages and online diaries where people could post personal messages about anything in their lives—complete with pictures, music, and other media. When tools became available to make frequent posting and linking easier, the true blog emerged.

What separates a blog from an online journal is the community and interaction that accompanies it. While an online journal allows a user to post personal messages and content, a blogger includes links to other relevant blogs and includes backtracks. Backtracks are posts which continue a conversation from another blog on one's own blog and typically include the original post for reference. Many bloggers read and comment at other authors' blogs. All of this linking and commenting creates an inter-related network of blogs called the "blogosphere."

TYPES OF BLOGS

Businesses can utilize blogs in two primary formats: internal and external — each with its own unique applications. These applications can be dramatically altered depending on the options blog administrators have enabled.

INTERNAL

An internal blog exists "behind the firewall." It is accessible only from within the company's network. Internal blogs can be used to facilitate one-way information sharing as an executive or manager shares her insights with other employees. Another level of settings allows readers to comment on posts where they may provide feedback on another employee's post. The most liberal settings al-

low anyone to start a new post, allowing employees to start new conversation threads for each other to read.

The model in which only one or a few members of management are allowed to post new articles provides the ability to quickly update the entire workforce on company initiatives, policy changes, upcoming events, or completed milestones. Employees have a single location where they can go to quickly update themselves on corporate happenings.

This model is also the easiest to manage. Having only one person posting makes it easier to ensure that content is valid and adheres to corporate policy. There should be little worrying that something which shouldn't be shared will be — though that possibility does still exist.

The one-poster style of blog is limiting, though. By disallowing comments, little sense of community is developed. While many employees may be glad simply to hear from high level management on a regular basis, uni-directional conversation does not foster open communication.

The second model eliminates this limitation. Allowing employees to post comments in reply to management's blog entries builds a link between the two groups. Executives can keep a finger on the pulse of their workforce, and managers can gain feedback on projects or ideas they might implement. This enables a "flatter" corporate hierarchy, in the fashion of many modern corporate structures.

There is, however, more chance for a blogging mishap once you enable employees to leave messages on the blog. The opportunity for something inappropriate to be posted increases drastically. If employee commenting is to be allowed, a much more involved policy on blogging must be developed. Also, this is a much larger undertaking for the HR and IT departments.

The riskiest and potentially most rewarding internal blogging model allows any employee to start new posts. This situation can create a collaborative environment not possible without an online forum having the functionality of blogs. Without blogs, an employee might ask a question of a single or a few co-workers. By posting the question on a blog, a solution may be solicited from anyone in the organization with expertise in the topic. The right architecture can connect employees from around the world for resource and idea sharing. Teammates can easily keep the whole team informed on project progress, and managers can announce to a whole office when impressive tasks have been completed by their employees.

Likewise, employees can use the blog to stay in touch on a personal level. Blogs can be used to organize extra-

curricular sports leagues or other events, facilitate ticket and garage sales, or share birth and marriage announcements.

EXTERNAL

External blogs are made available on the Internet for the world to read. These are intended for marketing and for developing a community based around your products or brand. External blogs offer a forum for company representatives to communicate with the public. Executives can release important industry relevant news, developers can share product documentation, employees can provide a window into daily life at the organization, and marketers can communicate directly with their target audiences. The latter option, although tempting, has risks and is discussed in the Best Practices section of this paper.

Like internal blogs, the external model may also implement systems based on the privileges granted to various user classes with similar risks and advantages. Stricter policies create a safer, more legal-friendly blog while looser policies can create a larger and tighter community. Wherever in the policy spectrum a company's needs lie, there are a number of best practices to follow.

BEST PRACTICES

1. *Transparency is Key*

People who read and write blogs generally speak plainly and expect others to do the same. The cynical nature of bloggers causes them to quickly dismiss messages that employ buzz-words and marketing speak. It is important that blog posts always be candid and honest.

It should also be clear who is blogging and why. Most people want to know the source of any information and blogs are no exception. In the case of corporate blogs, readers will want to know the poster's position in the organization and the motivation for making public announcements on the Internet.

Bloggers are already on the Internet and use it to relentlessly check facts and sources. If they feel like a post is an attempt to hoodwink them with half-truths or camouflaged marketing messages, bloggers will make short work of discrediting an author — and the parent company. Credibility is particularly hard to recover in the blogosphere, and failed attempts at slighting the blog community frequently make headlines. Several case studies address this golden rule of blogging.

2. *Develop a Community*

One of the primary benefits of blogging is that it can develop a new level of loyalty among existing customers, as well as reach new ones. In order to do this, a company blogger should know their audience and write specifically for them. Authors should use language that is familiar to the industry or customer demographics, and be able to speak on a personal level. Readers who are interested enough in a topic to blog about it will typically have an in-depth knowledge of the subject and will easily recognize it when a company representative does not. Again, this can bring the credibility of a whole company into question.

It is also possible to extend your brand to groups with similar interests, but who may not be familiar with your products specifically. To do this, a blog should maintain a blogroll of other relevant blogs and websites. Bloggers should approach the owners of these sites about also being added to their blogroll. Backtracking is another way to extend the reach of a blog and to maintain relationships with other bloggers.

For companies that already foster online communities (user groups, owner groups, or dealer portals, for example), blogs can serve as an effective mechanism to build and strengthen those communities. This can be particularly effective when customers have a strong affinity to the company's products and brand, and the customer demographic has a growing level of blog use and acceptance.

3. *Be Consistent*

As with any publication, readers of blogs become familiar with a format and a style of writing. Using a consistent voice will help readers associate with a particular blog or blogger.

Likewise, blog policies must remain consistent and must be enforced equitably. Comments should not be allowed on one post, but then not on another. This will catch the attention of bloggers' trademark cynicism and will more likely have them focusing on why policies have been changed rather than on the blog content. An option for addressing this particular issue is to always screen comments in order to filter inappropriate messages.

4. *Make a Policy*

Blogs are inherently risky for an enterprise. Legal threats exist in both internal and external blogs, in posting on others' blogs, and even in employees posting their own blogs outside of work. Having clear, simple company policies can help prevent public debacles. It is important to involve the legal department

early in developing policies so that safety can be ensured but posts don't seem sterilized.

Remember that every discussion is on the record. Blogs are personal, even in the corporate setting, but they should also be treated professionally. Blogs that are edited or deleted are still recorded and can be used as evidence if necessary. Posts must meet the scrutiny of both human resources and legislation. Sarbanes-Oxley rules apply to information exchanged via blogs, as do other privacy and financial laws. Be prepared to handle these laws and be prepared to handle violations of blogging policies.

5. *Be Committed*

Once the decision to blog has been made, it must be supported by both management and the employee, or employees, designated as bloggers. Posts must be made frequently and regularly. If a blog is well written, readers will look forward to each new post and subsequent discussions. A lack of commitment to a blog portrays a lack of commitment to company initiatives and customers may recognize this as a lack of commitment to products and services.

6. *Acknowledge Faults and Missteps*

Blogs are a relatively new tool in the corporate setting. As such, using them is still a learning process and it is possible that mistakes will be made. These could be in the form of misinformation, the exposure of confidential information, or the release of embarrassing information about an organization. They could also surface as poor product reviews or wrongly executed marketing maneuvers.

When attempts are made to cover up mistakes, or a company shows hesitation in addressing some issue that appears on the Internet, bloggers tend to ruthlessly attack those companies. The blogosphere has generally been quick to forgive the companies that quickly and honestly admit to having made a mistake.

8. *Take the Good with the Bad*

It is likely that negative comments will be made about a company or its products at some point. This could occur on that company's blog or on another. It is important to address these dissenting opinions tactfully. Don't suppress negative comments. Rather, use the blog to engage detractors in conversation and determine if there is an opportunity to improve your product. Customers will appreciate the openness and willingness to listen, especially those within the blogosphere.

9. *Ensure Weblog Usability*

A blog is ultimately a web page and all the best prac-

tic guidelines of Web site usability apply to blogs as well. However, the special characteristics of blogs also require consideration of other usability practices such as having meaningful posting titles, providing convenient navigation (not just calendar based), and avoiding unrelated mix of topics. Jakob Nielsen (<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/weblogs.html>) and others have compiled a variety of usability guidelines for Weblogs.

9. *Have clarity of weblog strategy, goals, and metrics*

A key to the success of any initiative is having a clear strategy, a well understood set of goals, and the metrics and process to evaluate performance and impact. Therefore, any corporate Weblogging initiative should also pay careful attention to these issues. There is a high risk of failure of blogging effort where the purpose is unclear and measures of success are undefined. This makes it difficult not only to justify resource commitment, but also to understand how improvements can be made.

CASE STUDIES — GOOD

Macromedia (<http://weblogs.macromedia.com/>)

The Macromedia blogs are an example of how to utilize blogs beyond marketing. Developers at Macromedia use an external blog with comments to keep in touch with end users. Through their blogs, these developers disseminate information about new features in their products and how to best take advantage of included features. They also receive feedback on current and future initiatives. This helps them quickly respond to bugs users may find and allows them to develop the product features their users want and need.

The blogs also allow the developers to discuss their daily thoughts and activities. This gives users a window into the company, and fosters trust and friendship between the company and its customers.

Google

Google implemented an internal blog which allows employees to share ideas and collaborate on projects. This allows for quick answers to each others' questions, and acts as a searchable database of knowledge.

The Google blog also allows employees to make personal posts such as classifieds and invitations to extracurricular activities like softball and bowling leagues. Much like Macromedia's blogs create a tight-knit community outside the organization, Google's blogs bring employees closer together in both work and play.

Sun (<http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan>)

Sun has been successful blogging both internally and externally. Their internal blog acts as an information management tool for researchers and developers.

Sun's external blog is a forum for Chief Operations Officer Jonathon Schwartz to discuss his views on the technology industry. The blog is updated every few days and includes Mr. Schwartz's opinion on industry happenings, Sun's ideas, and other news. This blog is famous for giving a personal look into the mind and job of an executive at a major corporation.

IBM (http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/dw_blog_comments.jspa?blog=351&entry=81328)

IBM is recognized for several blogging activities. Management openly encourages all employees to blog both internally and externally. Also, they developed a great set of blogging guidelines to coincide with their support of the technology. The way in which the guidelines were developed is particularly worth mentioning.

The rules were developed by employee bloggers using an internal wiki. This method ensured that those with the most expertise in the subject could define the do's and don'ts of the technology. Legal counsel was also included in the process, and much attention was paid to the policies of other successful blogging organizations such as Sun, Microsoft, and Google.

CASE STUDIES — BAD

Mazda

Mazda's blogging example highlights the importance of the first rule of blogging: being open and honest. In what has come to be known as the Halloween M3 debacle, so named for the poster "Kid Halloween," a blog was made on Google's *Blogger* weblog hosting site in November, 2004. The blog was supposedly created by a 23 year old interested in car videos and contained links to Mazda car commercials and to a pair of car chase scenes featuring the Mazda M3. Other bloggers quickly called into question whether this was a legitimate blog or if it was an astroturfing attempt by Mazda. Copies of the car chase recordings were found on the website of the marketing company that recorded them and Mazda's online credibility was severely tarnished. The blog was removed within hours of the discovery.

Mazda failed to comment on the accusations of unethical marketing practices in a reasonable amount of time, and the blogosphere responded with many posts across the

Internet expressing their dismay at Mazda's handling of the situation.

Mazda failed to be open and honest with their audience. A blog post by marketing that was open about the post being from marketing would likely have been much better received. They also underestimated the lengths to which bloggers will go in determining the validity of posts.

Kryptonite

The Kryptonite bike lock company suffered an expensive, reputation crippling episode at the hands of bloggers. When it was discovered that the company's locks could be picked with a cheap, disposable writing pen, videos and testimonials quickly circulated around the blogosphere. Kryptonite, which had no staff dedicated to blogs or message boards, were slow to react to the posts and initially responded with comments defending their product's integrity.

The blogosphere showed its trademark fervor for news about exploits in this case, and Kryptonite displayed the importance of being prepared for blogging. In this example, the issue was not in how a company manages its own blogs, but in how they handle blogging in general. The same rules apply, though. Kryptonite was unprepared for the media, tried to cover their mistakes, and initially denied their shortcomings. In addition to the 10 million dollar expense of replacing their faulty bike locks, the company suffered humiliation on the Internet as bloggers openly mocked the company's practices and policies. The blasting Kryptonite took in the blogosphere extended into main-stream media. There is no saying how much damage was done to the company's bottom line as a result of mishandling the situation in the blogging community.

Delta Airlines (<http://queenofsky.journalspace.com/>)

Another company whose blogging woes came not from their own blog, but from the mismanagement of events in the blogosphere is Delta Airlines. In October of 2004, Delta fired an employee over pictures of herself in her uniform which were posted on the employee's personal blog. Delta deemed the pictures "inappropriate," but never specified which pictures were inappropriate or why.

Delta may or may not have been justified in firing the flight attendant. However, their improper handling of the situation is what brings this example to the "Bad" category of case studies. First, the company did not have a clearly defined policy regarding employees' online behavior. This meant they had little to support their decision to fire the employee. Second, the blogosphere interpreted the firing as an attack on blogging in general. They fired back with

a negative campaign of posts around the Internet. Lastly, Delta had no plan for dealing with such a campaign, and initial attempts to put out the fire merely fanned the flames.

GETTING STARTED

It is almost a certainty that blogging will play a role in your corporate future, whether it comes in the form of posts on other blogs or through the creation of your own corporate blog. Reading this paper is a good first step in preparing for blogging. Here are a few more suggestions for starting your own corporate blog:

Work Gradually

Introduce the people you expect to be posting to blogs by having them read others' blogs. This will familiarize them with how blogs work, and what readers come to expect from them. Try subscribing these people to RSS feeds with articles relevant to their work or to other corporate blogs. Some good examples include:

GM FastLane: General Motors' blog about the auto industry and company news. <http://fastlane.gmblogs.com>

Scobleizer: A blog by Robert Scoble, one of Microsoft's blogging community reps. Contains posts about Microsoft, the technology industry and current events. <http://scobleizer.wordpress.com/>

Further, try an internal blog before moving to external communications. This provides an opportunity to smooth out policies as well as technical issues before being visible to the public.

Develop Policies

This was discussed as a blogging best practice, and its importance warrants repetition. Work with those who will be blogging in developing the rules to ensure that they are familiar with them and buy into their value. Also, look to other successful blogging policies for guidance. Develop policies after bloggers have become familiar with the blogosphere, but before they have their own blogs. Some of the better blogging guidelines include:

Feedster's corporate blogging guidelines: http://feedster.blogs.com/corporate/2005/03/corporate_blogg.html

Yahoo!'s guidelines for employees blogging on others' sites (PDF): <http://jeremy.zawodny.com/yahoo/yahoo-blogguidelines.pdf>

Build Your Own Blog

If you intend to operate your own blog, a custom built platform is not essential, but it is highly recommended.

Whether you do so in house or contract out, developing your own brand and voice will be easiest on a blog built specifically for your company. Both credibility and control will be lost if readers are referring to a URL from a free blog provider. It may be a good idea, however, to look to these public blogging hosts for design and feature ideas. A few of the most popular are:

Blogger: Owned by Google, this blog features a web client, simple settings, and a clean interface.

<http://www.blogger.com/start>

Wordpress: Posting on Wordpress requires a downloadable client that offers more features and more complexity than some other free blogging tools.

<http://wordpress.com/>

Be Yourself

Adhere to the best practices, but once everything is in place let your bloggers be themselves.

BLOGSPEAK

- **Astroturfing** – A marketing fabricated grassroots campaign. Negative connotation. Leads to loss of credibility and diminishes corporate integrity.
- **Backtracking** – Linking to a discussion on another weblog for the purpose of continuing the discussion on one's own weblog. Usually includes a reference quote from the original blog.
- **Blog** – Short for weblog.
- **Blogosphere** – The online blogging community as a whole. Describes the network which connects blogs to each other.
- **Blogroll** – A list of blogs frequented by, or related to one's own blog.
- **Blog Sack** – Terminate an employee for blogging. (aka -doocing)
- **External** – A style of blog written by employees for reading by anyone, including other employees and citizens.
- **Internal** – A style of blog written by employees for sharing ideas and managing information within the company.
- **Newsgroup** — An online bulletin board for posting news and other announcements.
- **Perma-link** — A link to the actual posted article. Use-

ful, as blogs are typically updated frequently and new articles may replace old ones on the blog's main page within a day.

- **RSS** – Really Simple Syndication. A tool for automatically delivering updated content to subscribers.
- **Splog** – A blog posted by a spammer, typically with malicious intent.
- **Spamalanche** – A large scale attack of splogs intended to overwhelm RSS readers and blogging sites.
- **TrackBack** – A system that allows a blogger to see who has written an entry elsewhere about the original post. Empowers backtracking.
- **Wiki** — A tool for collaboration which allows many users to add or change content.

WEBLOG EXAMPLES

Macromedia's corporate weblog: <http://weblogs.macromedia.com/>

Jonathon Schwartz's executive blog: <http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan>

IBM's blogging guidelines:

http://www.128.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/dw_blog_comments.jsp?blog=351&entry=81328

GM's corporate weblog site: <http://fastlane.gmblogs.com>

Robert Scoble's famous blog: <http://scobleizer.wordpress.com/>

Feedster's corporate blogging guidelines: http://feedster.blogs.com/corporate/2005/03/corporate_blogg.html

Yahoo!'s guidelines for employees personal blogging (PDF): <http://jeremy.zawodny.com/yahoo/yahoo-blogguidelines.pdf>

Blogger weblog host: <http://www.blogger.com/start>

Wordpress weblog host: <http://wordpress.com/>

For more tools and example blogs, please visit the blogging paper page through the UW E-Business Consortium's website at <http://www.uwebc.org/opinionpapers>

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