

BEST PRACTICES



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B2B Marketers: Are You Ready To Blog?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Along with podcasts and RSS feeds, business marketers are planning to add blogs to their mix of marketing tactics. Before initiating what could easily degenerate into simply another promotional channel, marketers and their sales and support counterparts should understand whether a blog will engage prospects and customers at a deeper level than can be done with existing communication channels. To keep blogs from consuming marketing resources with little measurable payoff, firms must willingly invest the resources — and stomach the risks — to realize the long-term benefits that blogs offer in thought leadership and customer intimacy.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Interactive marketing professional; marketing leadership professional; technology marketing, sales, and management professional

B2B BLOG INTEREST IS GROWING RAPIDLY

With tens of thousands of new blogs appearing daily, it is not surprising that many business-to-business (B2B) marketers ask Forrester with increasing frequency whether they should start their own corporate blogs. In conversations at our recent Technology Leadership Forum 2006 in Scottsdale, Ariz., and at a series of B2B marketing boot camps, business marketers told us that blogging is on their list of hot topics to investigate. Forrester believes that blog interest will continue to increase throughout 2006 because:

- **Technology buyers are turning to blogs for information.** In a survey of more than 4,500 tech subscribers, KnowledgeStorm and Universal McCann reported that 57% of respondents said they read technology blogs at least once a week, and 53% felt that blog content already influenced their work-related IT purchase decisions.¹ To be fair, most also saw blog credibility as a major hurdle to widespread adoption, a view carried over from early blog origins as personal diaries and podiums backed more by opinion than by expertise. Techies adopt early, but Forrester believes that their readership will boost corporate interest in blogs in adjacent industries like business services and telecommunications that shadow high-tech trends closely.
- **The ranks of corporate bloggers continue to grow.** In addition to sole proprietors and small startups, well-known brands like Boeing, Hewlett-Packard, Sun Microsystems, and Xerox are

joining the blogosphere today. These corporate blogs — authored by luminaries like Sun's CEO Jonathan Schwartz or Boeing's Marketing VP for commercial airplanes Randy Baseler — pursue thought leadership, human interest, and community-building goals.² The key challenge? Building an audience that turns first to the corporate blog for information and insight, especially when bad news or rumors pop up.

- **B2B marketers plan to invest more in emerging tactics.** Of the 210 B2B marketers who told us that they use tactics like blogging, podcasts, and RSS feeds today, more than 70% said they expect to boost their spending on these tactics during the next 12 months.³ While this number may seem remarkable, it is more of an indication of direction than of absolute spending, as emerging tactics receive a very small portion of the marketing budget today.

BUT CORPORATE BLOGGING DOESN'T DRIVE SALES — YET

Forrester expects that B2B historians will look back on 2006 as the seminal year for corporate blogging. But marketers waver between enthusiasm for the medium and concern over its ability to attract, persuade, and keep business buyers interested. While starting a blog may be easy, building a blog that drives measurable business results will take a mix of art and experience to master because:

- **Conservative business practices hold B2B bloggers back.** Outside of high technology, B2B marketers find it challenging to give customers, prospects, and public commentators a voice in online content. They worry that, given free rein, bloggers might make negative comments that hurt their company's image, brand, or standing in the market. If marketers can't alleviate fears about blogging risks, they may have to take an intermediate approach, as Boeing does by disallowing comments on individual posts.
- **Good business blog examples are hard to find.** Few firms have yet to achieve the right mix of participation, authorship, and purpose to distinguish them as case studies that other marketers could emulate. Many blogs are not well written and wander from topic to topic with little direction or purpose. Without successful examples to follow, corporate marketers struggle to find the right voice, content, and audience for the blogs they would like to initiate. To find the best examples to emulate, turn to business-oriented blog directories like Technorati, and search closely related topics. Ask peers, sales engineers, and techie folks you know which business blogs they find useful, and browse these, as well.
- **Business blog readers aren't used to participating in open forums.** While business decision-makers read blogs to learn more about a firm's products and services, they don't spend time posting comments or engaging in public, online conversations. Interest in online content — blog or otherwise — declines sharply when buyers stop evaluating products or when they make a purchase decision. If a blog entry raises questions or concerns, business readers email or call the blog author privately to get the answers they need. The opportunity for business marketers

here is to use the blog to gather feedback, spark conversation, and move prospective buyers a bit further down the sales funnel through open dialog, regardless of whether they are frequent or itinerant readers.

- **The best corporate blogs don't always come from marketing.** While B2B blogs use an authentic voice and consistent point of view, most come across as more promotional than openly communicative. Jim Firestone, the president of Xerox North America, gets full credit for creating the *Big I, little t Blog* to talk to customers about business and strategy, but he admits that it's a learning process to keep marketing-speak in check.⁴ Jim Cahill, marketing communications manager at Emerson Process Management, uses a blog to share best practices in manufacturing automation by summarizing tips and experience gathered from internal experts — a smart way to expose Emerson's expertise without directly plugging products and solutions.

READY FOR BLOGGING? ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS FIRST

Successful blogs connect with a community through two interrelated ingredients: relevant content that is worth reading and a perspective that generates contribution and conversation. Establishing this two-way communication between a business and its customers is challenging. To determine if blogging is right for you, executive management, marketing, sales, and support must be prepared to answer critical questions like:

- **Which conversations will drive participation in your industry?** As tempting as it may be to jump on the blog bandwagon, talk first with customers and sales (as a proxy for prospects) to learn what buyers really want to know about your company, products, and strategy. As a company, are you willing to tackle key industry questions related to viability, competitiveness, and long-term innovation to win blog readership through thought leadership and transparency?
- **What is the key audience that your blog will reach?** This question assumes that your current marketing channels and communication don't reach — or fully engage — your prospective blog audiences today. Unlike general publications or Web sites, blogs reach limited audiences and require a personal touch, patience, and persistence to build readership and participation. Their success depends not only on reach and frequency but also on participation by readers who matter. How much time and effort is your firm willing to invest to acquire and win over this caliber of reader?
- **Will the blog format encourage audience participation?** Even if marketers can zero in on the right audience, getting them to engage doesn't follow immediately. Rather than posting a blog comment, some customers and prospects may prefer to communicate privately or anonymously. Marketers should think of blog posts as a springboard for the community that forms around it and give readers other options — like links to a poll, newsletter subscription offers, or an email address — to build blog engagement without posting comments.

- **What will a company-sponsored blog achieve for your firm?** Agreeing on a unified, specific blog purpose is difficult to do, but B2B marketers will never determine whether their blogging effort is worthwhile without stating explicit goals. In addition to gathering hard metrics like frequency, numbers of unique readers, postings, RSS subscriptions, and trackbacks, how will you determine whether your blog has a positive influence on brand, image, or customer satisfaction?
- **Who should own the blog's content?** While her public writing skills may be finely honed, the marketing executive's voice may not collect the most blog readers because it may lack authenticity. High-tech developers and product managers like those publishing on Microsoft's *Channel 9* earn more notice because blog audiences value their insider, close-to-the-product view.⁵ Functionality, best practices, and tricks of the trade grab the audience's attention, so save your marketing-speak for other communication tactics.
- **How will the blog fit into the rest of your communication strategy?** While promotion is not the sole reason to establish a blog, marketers should understand how a blog may benefit other areas of the business outside of marketing and sales. Will an engaged blog community help boost customer service, innovate new products or services, or enhance the flow of information both inside and outside your organization?

RECOMMENDATIONS

WADE INTO MARKETING BLOGS SLOWLY

Relatively few B2B marketers have sufficiently solid answers to move ahead full-speed into blogging. But reading and contributing to relevant blogs is the best way to dip a toe into blog waters and get familiar with conventions and best practices. Initiate marketing-driven blogs after mastering other mainstream interactive tactics like search marketing, email, and Web seminars, which have proven paths to ROI. Marketers who are ready to take the plunge off the blogging diving board should:

- **Set industry communication and community building as top goals.** Blogs are unproven as direct marketing tools, but they can develop a culture of generosity through trust building, social networking, recruiting, community forming, and corporate intelligence. Open dialog and altruistic goals circulate new ideas inside an industry and raise awareness about best practices outside of it. Blogging to serve the greater purposes of an industry — not just an individual firm — will garner awareness and participation among the blogging community.
- **Build synergy between blogging and search engine marketing.** Blogs can draw prospects into the company from search results when people enter specific keywords and see thought-leading or provoking posts on that topic. Because their content changes frequently, blogs

can aid search engine optimization and positively influence a firm's search results rankings. Building off this synergy can help marketers boost their brand awareness when searchers find, read, and link to blogs that associate a company with their topics of interest.

- **Revitalize the corporate crisis communication processes.** The risks associated with exposing your brand to public critique exist, whether a firm initiates its own blog or not. B2B firms: Update your crisis communication policies to address negative blog commentary specifically. Without crisis intervention, firms fail to answer bloggers, as lock manufacturer Kryptonite did when bloggers posted videos in 2004 showing how to overcome its locking mechanism with a ballpoint pen. Instead, corporate policies should clearly spell out who should respond, how they should respond, and what they should track to make sure negative posts don't snowball into more negative publicity.
- **Establish clear blogging policies before starting any blog.** The best blogs rely on employees (and other insiders) to share information. However, employees are human and may talk too much. To ward off potential problems, firms should develop blogging policies and practices that keep company secrets and personal lives from becoming public. Policies should give explicit examples of information that should not be shared on a blog and should explain the consequences of using blogs outside of the corporate guidelines.⁶ For example, Sun's legal team now reads all blog postings after Schwartz's 2004 blog comments about IBM, Red Hat, and SUSE caused Novell's stock to jump.⁷

ALTERNATIVE VIEW

B2B BLOGS SERVE NICHE AUDIENCES

While new innovations among industrial components like ball bearings, pumps, and compressors may not keep pace with Moore's Law, manufacturers shouldn't cross blogs off their communications list. Niche industry publications like *Chemical Week*, *Masonry Magazine*, and *Scrap* (the bimonthly magazine of the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries) maintain circulation numbers that blogs, as an alternative publishing media, could supplement or enhance. Highly regulated industries should limit their blogging to policy issues or unregulated areas like recruitment. Blogs may not be right for every B2B marketer or industry right now, but experimenting with blogs that reach smaller, exclusive audiences is a safe way to start.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In August 2006, KnowledgeStorm and Universal McCann fielded an online survey of business and IT professionals on the topics of blogs and RSS. Some 4,500 business and IT professionals responded, and the survey results have been quoted highly in the media. Source: "Emerging Media Series: How Blogs and Real Simple Syndication (RSS) Impact B2B Technology Purchase Decisions," KnowledgeStorm and Universal McCann, September 2006 (<http://www.knowledgestorm.com/search/viewabstract/84548>).

- ² See *Randy's Journal* (<http://www.boeing.com/randy/>), *The Marketing Excellence blog by Eric Kintz* (<http://h20325.www2.hp.com/blogs/kintz/>), *Jonathan's Blog* (<http://blogs.sun.com/jonathan/>), and *Big I, little t Blog* (<http://www.bigilittleblog.com/blog/>).
- ³ In Q2 2006, Forrester surveyed 569 B2B marketing professionals about their current use of marketing tactics, how effective they found these tactics, and where they expect to spend on the same tactics during the next 12 months. Results show that B2B marketers plan to spend more on email; Webinars; rich media or online video; and a new class of emerging tactics that include RSS feeds, podcasting, and blogs. See the August 2, 2006, Trends "[B2B Marketing Needs A Makeover — Now.](#)"
- ⁴ On September 21, 2006, Jim Firestone responded to our blog posting "Should B2B Marketers Blog?" and commented that ". . . we're learning some interesting lessons. One of them is to tone down the marketing and still answer questions about our business and strategies." See *Big I, little t Blog* (<http://www.bigilittleblog.com/blog/>) and *Forrester's Marketing Blog*, September 14, 2006 (http://blogs.forrester.com/marketing/2006/09/should_b2b_mark.html).
- ⁵ See <http://channel9.msdn.com/>
- ⁶ In writing a corporate blogging policy, companies should establish which rules are inviolable (like respecting existing confidentiality agreements) and set expectations on when the company will intervene. The company may also limit blogging activity during work hours, either for legal or productivity reasons. See the November 5, 2004, Best Practices "[Blogging: Bubble Or Big Deal?](#)"
- ⁷ In an August 2004 post, Schwartz strongly suggested that acquiring Novell could hurt major Sun rival IBM. Source: Benjamin Pimintel, "Sun head ponders buying Novell: Was Schwartz's blog stirring the pot or tipping his hand?" *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 3, 2004 (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/08/03/BUGH081M4D1.DTL&type=business>). Sun's CIO, Bill Vass, later defended this practice but mentioned that the company's legal team now reviews employee posts, including Schwartz's. Source: Renai LeMay, "Sun's CIO backs blogs despite lawyer worries," *ZDNET Australia*, July 15, 2005 (http://www.builder.au.com.au/news/soa/Sun_s_CIO_backs_blogs_despite_lawyer_worries/0,339028227,339199143,00.htm).