How Blogs Are Changing the Way Businesses Talk with Customers

NAKED CONVERSATIONS

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MAIN IDEA
When Web based logs (abbreviated as “blogs”) first started appearing, most people considered them to be quirky entities for people with exhibitionist tendencies. At first, blogs seemed to appeal to the lunatic fringe of people who wanted a personal soapbox from which they could put forward their view of the world. Then a funny thing happened. Blogs crossed over from the conspiracy theorists into the broader business community and consumers have taken to this informal channel of business communication with a passion rarely before witnessed.

In particular, keeping a blog (abbreviated as “blogging”) is fast becoming an extremely effective form of two-way communication between companies and their customers. The appeal of blogging to a customer is obvious – they feel like they are getting inside information about what’s happening from someone who really knows what’s going on inside the corporation. That’s highly alluring and fun for customers to be part of. Customers also love the fact they’re interacting with a real person who makes mistakes and occasionally misspells things rather than someone who reads from a perfect script prepared by the company’s PR department. Many consumers are sick to death of hearing automated voice-mail telling them their call is important but cannot be answered right at the moment. Blogging is the antidote to that because it provides direct human contact and interaction.

From your company’s point-of-view, running a blog enables you to engage in a candid two-way conversation with your customers and potential customers. You can find out what people are actually thinking rather than relying on focus groups or other artificial means. Even better, search engines like Google and others rank business blogs higher than ordinary Web sites. That means if you have a business blog with frequent entries and multiple feedback postings, you can often move your ranking well above that of your competitors. This is quite possibly one of the best kept secrets of using search engines to best advantage.
It seems very likely that business blogs are here to stay, and therefore it’s a good idea to work out now how best to adapt this conversational tool to meet your needs. This will pay far better dividends than hoping blogs fade away into the night. What form business blogs will actually take ten years from now still remains to be seen but there is little doubt blogging’s conversational capabilities will never become antiquated. Blogs decentralize corporate communications and wrestle control away from those who have historically controlled it. In and of itself, that can’t be a bad thing.

“Our passionate advice is that the time to join the conversation is now. The barriers to entry are minuscule, the benefits great, and blogging just happens to be fun. Enjoy. Come to our blogsite (www.nakedconversations.com) and tell us what you think. We’re always up for a good conversation.”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

About of Author

ROBERT SCOBLE assists with the running of Microsoft’s Channel 9 Web site. Mr. Scoble’s personal blog site, www.scobleizer.com, was begun in 2000 and now has more than 3.5 million readers every year. Robert Scoble has earned acclaim in Fortune magazine, Fast Company and The Economist for his work on business blogging.

SHEL ISRAEL has been involved in the introduction of some of technology’s most successful products including Microsoft PowerPoint, FileMaker and Sun Microsystems workstations. He has been involved in commercializing new innovations for more than twenty years.

While there are no absolutes, most blogs are set up as simple Web sites where stuff can be posted on an ongoing basis. Most blogs are reverse-chronological – the most recent entries are placed at the top, which means earlier entries get progressively moved down the page and then archived when thought appropriate.

For each entry posted to the blog, the reader can also post their own comments or views, and this automatically gets made available for everyone else to read. These reader add-ons are shown as feedback to the original entry so everyone is clear who is saying what.

Note also the entries to a blog are not solely text messages. It’s also possible to post pictures, hyperlinks, graphics, charts or other material. Text messages are the most common, but all sorts of other material can also be included at the writer’s discretion.

What are the key characteristics of blogs?

- Blogs are publishable – they can be set up and run for very low cost enabling people to post entries as often as they like. And whatever is posted is instantly available worldwide.
- Blogs are findable – all the search engines do a great job of helping people find blogs by keyword, subject or author. The more you post, the more readily your blog can be found.
- Blogs are very sociable – a blog is really nothing more than one big conversation. People with shared interests can build their relationships by linking blogs together.
- Blogs are viral – they can be spread very quickly by word-of-mouth or by mentions in other media. It’s very easy for new people to join the conversation.
- Blogs can be “syndicated” – meaning you can get notices e-mailed to you whenever new entries have been posted to the blog of your choice. You don’t even have to visit the Web site yourself to check if anything new has been added.
- Blogs are easily linkable – meaning what one blogger says can readily be read by millions of other people.
Why are blogs turning out to be so engaging?

Blogs appeal because of a number of different reasons:

■ People love the authenticity – this is a “warts-and-all” style conversation, with the occasional typo and politically incorrect viewpoint expressed. Instead of feeling like they are speaking with someone who is reading a script prepared and vetted by the corporate lawyers, the reader feels like they are getting genuine information from the key people involved.

■ This is a two-way conversation – where viewpoints can be expressed, even if those views are completely opposite to each other. This creates a robust and vibrant exchange of ideas with no holds barred or no taboo subjects. This creates confidence everything is being brought into the open and not just the good points the company is proud of.

■ Blogs give direct access to the organization’s top people – what they are thinking, where their passions are leading them and what interesting new developments are occurring. Generally speaking, these things never see the light of day, but blogs enable this information to be conveyed to customers. This can be quite alluring when customers hold the senior people in high esteem.

■ Blogs enable simple conversations to have a global audience – thereby removing any geographic boundaries. Companies can engage customers from a developing nation in a conversation just as readily as someone from one of the world economy’s superpowers. Blogs allow one person to engage in conversation anyone who has a computer and Internet access regardless of where they are located.

■ Blogging is not just for customers – it’s also great for building the relationships a business has with its suppliers, partners, distributors, allies and associates.

■ Blogging decentralizes corporate communications – and frees it from those who have historically guarded it and guided it. The unpredictable nature of blogging is a large part of its appeal.

■ Blogging is a very low-cost form of communication – where a company can reach thousands or even millions of people for an investment of just a few cents and a little bit of time.

““We are blogging champions. We believe that blogging is not just wise for businesses wishing to be closer with their customers, but essential. We envision a day in the near future when companies that don’t blog will be held suspect to some degree, with people wondering whether those companies have something to hide or whether the owners are worried about what the people who work for them have to say.””

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

““There is simply nothing more powerful than customer evangelists. Blogging enables companies to convert customers into world-championing evangelists, a powerful mechanism for true believers to spread the word about what you do and why other people should believe in what you’re doing.””

– Ben McConnell, author of Creating Customer Evangelists

““It began with conversations. Then we got into broadcast media. Now we are going back to conversations. It’s a full circle.””

– Terry Catchpole, The Catchpole Corporation

““Most people take a negative view of marketing. One communications executive at a large corporation admitted to us that he no longer reads the press releases from his own
communications department. 'They're just a bunch of crap,' he told us and then added, 'But we have some really cool bloggers'. We found this anticorporate sentiment pervasive in large companies, small businesses, and home offices. This sentiment is key to why blogging happens and why it matters.”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“Nothing great has been and nothing great can be accomplished without passion.”

– G.W.F. Hegel

In essence, business blogging can be thought of as word-of-mouth marketing on steroids. It's possible for a new idea to spread very quickly and to scale up quite impressively once it generates enough buzz. For example:

■ Firefox is an Internet browser which is considered to be simpler and more secure than Microsoft's Internet Explorer. It was launched exclusively from a blog site (www.spreadfirefox.com) which also served as Firefox's main distribution channel. Within 99 days of its launch, Firefox had been downloaded 25 million times. Another three months later, it passed the 50 million mark and is still going strong. Notably this was achieved without one single dime of advertising expenditure.

■ Bob Lutz, the vice chairman of General Motors, started his own blog (http://fastlane.gmblogs.com) so he could have a direct line of communication with GM customers. Lutz answers people's questions and talks about exciting new GM cars currently in the development pipeline. Lutz's blog is widely read and has earned him tremendous kudos at a time when General Motors seems to be embroiled in one controversy after another. For all the doomsday scenarios that people commonly forecast for GM, Lutz offers an alternative and far brighter perspective. Lutz has noted:

“Blogging shows how much passion people have for cars and trucks. It also serves as a reminder how many people are pulling for GM. It's terrific.”
Of Sun Microsystems’ 32,000 employees, more than 1,000 run blogs including one developed by Jonathan Schwartz, the company’s president and COO. Schwartz describes blogging as being like “kerosine on the fire” for Sun and feels blogging is a key reason why Sun’s relationships with software developers has increased markedly in recent times. Sun encourages an open environment as one of its key competitive advantages. Blogging increases transparency and participation appreciably. He recently commented: “The perception of Sun as a faithful and authentic tech company is now very strong. What blogs have done is authenticated the Sun brand better than a billion dollar ad campaign could have done. I care more about the ink you get from the developer community than any other coverage. Sun has experienced a sea change in their perception of us and that has come from blogs. Everyone blogging at Sun is verifying that we possess a culture of tenacity and authenticity.” (Schwartz’s blog is available at http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan).

Mark Cuban co-founded broadcast.com, a pioneer Internet radio and TV service. When Yahoo! acquired broadcast.com in 1999, Cuban became a billionaire. To celebrate, he purchased the Dallas Mavericks NBA team for $285 million. Since then, Cuban has rarely been out of the news and has had to pay more than $1 million in fines for his in-your-face confrontations with NBA referees. He lets off steam by writing a very popular blog (www.blogmaverick.com) which is part soapbox and partly a way to let off steam. His blog is free-ranging over a wide range of subjects Cuban feels passionate about – which turns out to be everything from Wall Street’s stock shorters through to predicting the death of CDs. His blog has drawn a huge following because it is consistently interesting. Cuban also has his own take on corporate openness, and has said: “Executives considering a blog should make sure you are the boss. I don’t think I would encourage executives who work for me to blog. There can be only one public vision for an organization. The boss and subordinates don’t always see eye-to-eye and having more than one message go out via blogs can be very counter-productive.”

Intel CEO Paul Otellini has a private blog called Paul’s Blog which is available only behind Intel’s firewall. He uses it as an opportunity to interact with the company’s 86,000 employees. Otellini always responds to postings, even those which directly challenge what Intel is doing. A similar kind of approach to private blogging is also followed by IBM, where there are reportedly more than 3,000 internal blogs which can be used for collaborative projects. All IBM employees are issued with a blog address when they get their network, intranet and e-mail accounts. It is also reported Disney Studios and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security are also heavy users of internal blogs as ways to share information quickly and efficiently.

Thomas Mahon is a Savile Row tailor in London. He makes some of the world’s finest suits which sell for as much as $4,000. He teamed up with Hugh Macleod, an ex-advertising executive, and decided to set up a blog which would display passion and authority for suit making rather than attempt to sell suits directly. This was how www.englishcut.com came into being in January 2005. On the blog, Mahon explains the labor which goes into making a fine suit and why the costs are justified. He uses the blog to position himself as the world’s most famous Savile Row tailor, an impression that was boosted when both CNN and The New York Times did stories about him in 2005. For Mahon, this PR has been invaluable and has had a direct flow-on effect on his sales. When Mahon had been in New York in December 2004, he had sold only two suits – barely enough to pay for the trip. When he went back to Manhattan ten weeks after starting his blog, he managed to sell 20 suits and eight
sportscoats – more than he had sold in the entire previous year. This is an excellent example of how a blog can assist a local merchant to achieve a global reach. Mahon now believes he could go to any major city in the world and be well enough known that he could sell a reasonable quantity of his suits. All he has to do is post on his blog he will be in a certain city at a particular time, and customers will track him down. Mahon’s blog has taken his word-of-mouth business and supercharged it based on the fact he shows passion for what he does. Mahon uses blogging as his sole means of promoting his business, not even bothering to run ads in the press.

Gary Hirshberg founded Stoneyfield Farm in 1983 as a small, organic farm school in Wilton, New Hampshire. Its chief assets at the time of its founding were seven cows. By 2005, Stoneyfield had grown into the world’s largest organic yogurt company with 2005 revenues estimated at $200 million. The company has achieved all this without doing virtually any paid advertising at all but by using guerilla marketing tactics. For example, the company sponsors strong women summits, supports programs to put healthy snacks into school vending machines and runs five different blogs dedicated to its five specific market niches: (1) Women (2) People concerned about junk food in schools (3) People concerned about organic food production (4) Parents of very young children (5) The company’s other customers. Stoneyfield has even hired Christine Halvorson as its Chief Blogging Officer. She recently commented: “We know the readers are enjoying them. It’s hard to quantify, but we assume we’ve garnered some positive impressions among our readers and that’s what counts most, not necessarily our ROI. We’ve gotten a lot of positive feedback from professionals in the marketing community about what we’re doing.” (These blogs are found at www.stoneyfield.com/weblog).

When Brian Glynn and Ben Williams opened a new restaurant called Horsefeathers in North Conway, New Hampshire in 1976, they realized they would have to find innovative ways to build their business. They started an e-newsletter to keep in touch with their customers which worked well for a while, but spam made their mailings less effective. They also put up a Web site for their restaurant but this looked very much like any other restaurant’s site. When they were thinking about new ways to build their business, they realized the whole key was to try and create a forum where happy customers could tell others they enjoyed eating at Horsefeathers. They decided to create an official Horsefeathers Restaurant Blog (http://hihowaya.blogs.com/weblog). Here, they post items about local ski and river conditions, historical items about their town and other local items like the construction of a new archery range. In the blog’s first year, it had more than 50,000 visitors – an average of around 150 to 200 people every day. On the strength of these word-of-mouth endorsements, Horsefeathers has grown into a $3 million a year business. Commented Ben Williams: “For us, this is a huge number. We have as many people visiting horsefeathers.com every day as we have seats in the dining room. The busiest day is always Thursday and the heaviest traffic occurs right after lunch. You have to think that these are our customers checking in to see what’s up for the weekend.”

In 2002, a Dutch marketing consultant, Marco W.J. Derksen, started his own blog on interactive marketing and new media, Marketing Facts (www.marketingfacts.nl). When traffic built to 2,000 visitors per day, he quit his day job and formed Upstream (www.upstream.nl), a consultancy on how businesses should blog. His new business has garnered loads of coverage in Dutch marketing magazines because of the fact he is one of the first Dutch blogging consultants. He recently said: “The gap between the product managers, the CEOs, and the consultants is huge in Europe, and changes
are slow. Brands and corporations all wonder why they should bother. They will come around to see blogging’s benefits when some unanticipated event will motivate thousands of consumers to express themselves. Brands will finally understand that traditional marketing becomes less important than word of mouth."

Richard Edelman is president and CEO of the world’s largest independent PR firm. Edelman PR has over 2,000 employees in 40 offices spanning four continents. In September 2004, he started his own blog (www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog). He recently noted: "Blogging is not a passing fad. Any brand, business or organization that fails to grasp that fact may very well be. It’s essential to any company seeking to connect in a spontaneous, continuous fashion with its publics. It affords a window into a company unlike any other – more credible because it lacks the dimension of control, more sustainable because it is rooted in reality, more powerful because it can be connected to comments of others having primary experiences with a company’s product or service. Smart companies take heed of what they learn from online critics, amending the product or process by being committed to continuous improvement from whatever source.” Edelman PR actively encourages all its clients to start and maintain their own blogs so they can generate good word-of-mouth endorsements.

Michel-Edouard Leclerc is president of the Association des Centres Distributeurs E. Leclerc, a co-operative association of about 600 retailers in France. The Association campaigns actively for consumer rights in France and M.E. Leclerc has very strong opinions on politics and global economic issues. He started blogging in early 2005 and every day posts something new to his blog in just the same way as people make diary entries. He notes blogging serves two key purposes. On a personal level, Leclerc finds keeping a blog helps him structure and organize his ideas thereby helping him clarify his vision for the future. On a professional level, his blog provides an efficient mechanism for communicating with people who are interested in his organization, his ideas and his views on everything from the French economy to social relations. Leclerc’s blog has proven to be so popular during the last national elections in France, he had to issue a public statement that he would not run for president even though many polls indicated he would be the front-runner. Leclerc later commented: "I think I am more legitimate and efficient in my economic activity. Within 20 years, my group has succeeded in changing the French legislation, which was quite dusty. We obtained a court decision against the oil monopolies. Thanks to our actions, there is free competition for cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and branded textiles. I did a lot for the practical transition to the Euro currency and lowered prices. One of the major questions today is the environment. I fight for the development of fair trade, for energy conservation, and for a reduction or recycling of packaging. If I were a member of Parliament, maybe I would be heard a little bit. But as a manager of a company who expresses himself with all the strength of a commercial network, I can make my ideas much more credible. Yes, it is on the practical level that I feel myself most effective. On my blog, as in all types of media, I can convey more positive ideas than if I would have been a mayor or an MP representing a district.” (M.E. Leclerc’s blog can be found at www.michel-edouard-Leclerc.com/blog/m.e.l).

The Isshin Dental Clinic in Yokohama, Japan set up a blog (www.haisha.biz/index.html) showing photos of its staff and other patient testimonials. Visitors can read answers to frequently asked questions and other material. The clinic’s revenue jumped 80 percent in less than a year after its blog was set up.
So what have these companies found are the potential problems in setting up a corporate blog? The types of fears which are often expressed include:

1. There is a fear that you’re giving customers a forum for negative comments – which may put others off from buying your product or service. You should ask yourself: “If I don’t provide a blog, does that mean people won’t say negative things about us online?” The answer is probably not as there are already loads of places where disgruntled customers can vent their spleens. You’re better off having negative comments somewhere where you can have a right of reply. Blogs also provide a place where satisfied customers can defend you and say the described experience is not typical of dealing with you. This is very helpful.

2. There is concern your employees may disclose confidential information on their blogs – which again is a legitimate concern. You have to bear in mind, however, employees can already disclose all sorts of information in e-mails which you’re probably not even aware were sent. You’re still better off to have everything in one centralized spot where you can be aware of what’s happening. Besides, your employees aren’t dumb and want to keep their jobs. This fear may be amplified beyond its normal occurrences.

3. There is no way to measure the return-on-investment for a company blog – which is true but the same could be said of any press release, corporate Web site or printed brochure. There usually isn’t any clear-cut ROI for your CEO speaking to an industry conference either. All of these can be considered part of your effort to build goodwill in the business community. You’ll probably just have to live with anecdotal evidence of the benefits of a blog for now.

4. Your sales staff may suggest there is a loss of control because there is no one-to-one dialogue happening in a blog – That’s quite possibly a valid point but keep in mind you as a blog owner you do maintain some control over the conversation on your blog. You can filter out rude, obscene or inappropriate comments. You can steer the ongoing conversation in a beneficial direction. That’s helpful in offsetting this concern.

5. Having a blog may disclose more information to your competitors than you would like – which again is a valid point. You can, however, anticipate this by setting guidelines for your employees and detailing clearly what they can and cannot include on their blogs. You might even find if you “good-mouth” your competitors by giving them credit when they deserve it on your blog, this will generate a huge amount of credibility for you. At the end of the day, you should trust your employees to act like adults.

6. Running a blog soaks up a lot of employee time – which is a limited business resource. Again, this is a worthwhilepoint to consider, but should it mean your organization ignores the blogging world altogether? To do that may confer market leadership on a competitor.

7. Disgruntled former-employees may use a blog to get revenge – which is true. By the same token, they also might attempt to take down your Web site but that remote possibility shouldn’t mean your company misses out on all the advantages of e-commerce. Again, by having any negative comments in the one place, you’re in a much better position to add some perspective than you would be if this was going on behind your back.

In the end, whether or not your organization can use blogging to good effect really comes down to a matter of corporate culture. Some companies have a culture that is
conducive to blogging while others have cultures which are not. If your company is also operating under restrictive government requirements about what can and cannot be disclosed, there will probably be a few more issues to sort out before you blog.

In the tech sector, two companies which have been at the forefront of corporate blogging have been Microsoft and Sun Microsystems – both generally considered to be secretive and aggressive entities. At the same time, two highly admired tech companies, Google and Apple Computer, have thus far largely missed out on the blogging trend. Their employee’s blogs are generally acknowledged as being quite tepid, as if supervisors were peering over their shoulders all the time. Corporate blogging is something you either should do well or not at all.

“Cultures change slowly. If yours is closed, we suggest opening it before shocking the system with a blog. If your employees feel untrusted, you may need to take steps to demonstrate your faith in them before you encourage blogging. If your culture’s communications policy is rooted in command-and-control rules, blogging will falter. If you don’t have genuine faith that you can evolve into a better company by listening to what your customers, prospects, investors, vendors and partners have to say, then a blogging effort will not provide you with its full value. If you don’t want to listen – really listen – then blogs will be thorny for you and your culture.”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“Sunlight is the best disinfectant – all great CEOs encourage transparency and openness as long as sensitive data is not leaked.”

– Jozef Imrich, author Cold River

“If an organization isn’t already in a place where openness and transparency in communication exists and is practiced, then using tools like blogs will be unlikely to do anything positive for your organization. If your openness/transparency foundation isn’t there, don’t blog.”

– Neville Hobson, PR consultant and podcaster

“If you can’t be candid about your company’s dirty laundry, then blogging probably isn’t for you. If you insist your company doesn’t have dirty laundry, then your company may be too boring to write about. Every company has its share of problems. If you aren’t willing to discuss them with some degree of openness, then you’ll be missing a huge amount of power that the blog could bring to your company. People are hungry for companies that have conversations with them – warts and all. They tend to distrust companies that try to say ‘Everything’s perfect here’.”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”

– Franklin Delano Roosevelt

“Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.”

– Malcolm Gladwell, author, The Tipping Point

“Now, the Web is enabling the market to converse again, as people tell one another the truth about products and companies and their own desires.”

– The Cluetrain Manifesto

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Blogging for business has a dark side and a light side – there are some things you should not do and other things you should do as a matter of course. First, the negatives:

- Whatever you do, keep your conversations “naked” – let people know who you are, where you’re coming from and why you believe the way you do. If you try and blog with a contrived personality, bloggers will sniff it out and expose you. Don’t do it. Be genuine when you blog. Write about what you feel passionate about.

- Don’t plunge into blogging without first taking the time and effort to learn the de facto rules of this type of activity – because failing to do that can damage your credibility permanently. Don’t extend traditional marketing tactics into blogging. This will offend everyone. Instead, acknowledge this is a new channel you need to get up to speed on first.

- If you make a mistake – apologize genuinely and ask bloggers to make suggestions about what you should do with your blog. Don’t just shut it down and fade quietly into the night if you make some early mistakes. Use that as an opportunity to show you want constructive feedback and help to develop a blog people will appreciate. Most blog readers will welcome the opportunity to help you improve.

- Remember authenticity is the coin of the blogging realm – and avoid the temptation to come up fictitious contributors. People will label your blog as “lame” if you try and be something you’re not. Remember, your blog will gain far more readers if your stated intention is to listen to customers rather than to manipulate them into buying something.

- Don’t ignore the problems bloggers bring to your attention – or you may have a full scale public relations disaster on your hands. If someone brings up a legitimate point, acknowledge it, describe what you’re doing to address the problem and how you’ll make good to your customers. The last thing you want to do is demonstrate you have no empathy with aggrieved customers or remedy to fix the problem. People realize problems crop up from time to time, so what you do to address these problems is more important than anything else.

- Don’t be so bland you avoid commenting on controversial subjects – because your
competitors won’t hesitate to plunge in and put their perspective forward. If your company is in the middle of some dramatic upheaval, talk about it. If you fail to do that, people will view your blog as more of a corporate brochure than a genuine insider’s viewpoint. In the world of blogging, being neutral, cautious or just plain tepid doesn’t get you very far. People want to hear the real oil about what’s happening inside your organization.

Don’t make your blog entries seem rushed and joyless – like you’ve got a thousand other things you’d rather be doing. It’s not helpful if you compose your entries in a style that comes across as hurried and forced. People will pick up on that and dislike it. Everyone is busy. Develop a blogging style which reflects your passions and interests rather than a need to fulfill your requirements as an employee. That’s what makes blogs such compelling reading for most people.

Admittedly, business blogs are evolving all the time and will no doubt be adapted in many different directions in the future. While there are no absolute rules to follow, the following guidelines have proven to be useful:

- Take the time to develop a blog title which is interesting and highly descriptive – because your blog’s name can help you define and own a market niche. People will find your blog through search engines so you want a blog title to appear which will entice people to visit. When one blog author changed the name of his blog from “The Average Joe” to “The Average Joe: A Book Publisher Blog”, awareness of his site and his search engine rankings grew appreciably. Your blog title is the headline for your blog, so be smart.

- Before you start your own blog, do your homework first – by reading a whole lot of other blogs. Make a list of what you like and what you don’t like from a wide selection of existing blogs. Get some ideas to build on and expand rather than attempting to do the same old thing everyone else is already doing.

- Keep things simple – it’s usually best to have each new post contain just the one idea or one set of links. If you try and have multiple ideas in your posting, it becomes confusing when people post feedback. Similarly, if there are multiple links, it’s hard for people to pass these on to others. Stick to one idea for each blog posting.

- Demonstrate your passion and show your authority – by posting frequently and talking about those subjects you know inside and out. Showcase your insider knowledge and demonstrate you know what you’re talking about. Make it easy for influential people to link to your blog with confidence.

- Always remember a blog is an ongoing conversation – so you need to allow other people to add comments to your entries. If you don’t allow comments, people will view your blog as a PR channel. You don’t have to tolerate rudeness but have a thick skin and take the good with the bad when it comes to feedback.

- Be accessible – make it easy for people to contact you through your blog. Include your cell phone number or at the very least your e-mail address on your blog. Make it easy for people to follow up on things they read directly and in person with you. This can generate some great business opportunities.

- Always tell an engaging story – which will be your story. Everyone loves a
David-versus-Goliath story. If you’re the underdog, point that out. Drop some influential names. Include some case studies. Talk about the conflicts which arise whenever anyone is attempting to achieve something noteworthy. Corporate blogging centers around telling an engaging story. Present facts objectively and with balanced analysis but frame everything in terms of an ongoing drama and your blog will genuinely get noticed.

- Be happy to link to anyone and everyone – your enemies, your competitors, your industry commentators and anyone else you can think of. Develop your own blog as the absolutely best resource your readers could ever want and they will be keen to link with you as well.

- Don’t just leave everything to your blog – but get out into the real world as well. Accept speaking invitations or opportunities to serve on discussion panels. Attend industry forums and trade shows. Build relationships with people in the broader business community. Add some photos. Humanize your blog and people will respond positively.

- Keep track of who’s linking to your site – and read what they’re saying about you. This is the strength of blogs because they allow an ongoing conversation to develop. Respond to what others are saying by posting something on your own blog and linking to the other comments. This will demonstrate you’re listening and taking note of what others are saying, good or bad. There’s also tangible benefits to you. The more links you have, the higher your own blog’s search engine ranking will be, which is not a bad thing to aim for.

- Remember to talk rather than sell – in other words, don’t just funnel PR material through your blog. Talk with your readers about the things you care about and know. Being genuine is far more important than exploiting every opportunity to get a sale. Don’t try and sell your products or services directly from your blog but let people find them on their own. If they come to trust you because of your blog, they will happily track down and buy what you have to offer.

- Post often and be interesting with what you say – so readers get into the habit of visiting your blog frequently. Posting often will also help you with your search engine ranking.

- Look at blogging as an investment of time which saves you money in the long run – because a good blog can reduce or eliminate the need for PR or maybe even advertising. Research what you’re writing about so your facts are always correct and above reproach. Develop a robust conversation with your readers and make your blog useful and interesting. All of these efforts will take time but should ultimately serve to reduce the amount of PR and advertising support your products and services require.

- Plan on getting smarter by listening to what people are trying to tell you – because that’s one of the key advantages of a blog. Never forget everyone collectively is smarter than anyone individually. Take note of even the nastiest comments and try to figure out where people are coming from. Learn what makes people angry. Over time, once readers become confident you’re listening and responding, they will usually become far more moderate. You may even find they will spring to your defense when
something unreasonable or unbalanced is suggested by someone else.

With all these guidelines, you still have to use common sense as well. In some extreme cases, people have been disciplined or even fired for posting inappropriate material on their blogs. To avoid this, you need to know what is and isn’t acceptable under your corporate culture. You have to be trustworthy. Some companies have set out explicit guidelines for employee blogs, while others have not yet done this. The simplest advice in this area is: “Do nothing stupid.” Use the same level of judgement and good sense on your blog that you commonly apply to the rest of your job.

Some other advice in this area is:

■ Read the terms of your formal employment contract – and make sure you’re not stepping outside these guidelines by setting up a personal blog talking about what’s happening at your workplace.

■ Avoid any litigious issues – for example if you work for a public company, you have to be careful not to make any statements about financial performance that could impact on your company’s stock price. You should also be careful in discussing your company’s intellectual property or unannounced products. All of these are potential minefields.

■ Talk to your boss – and find out how he or she feels about you running a blog. You may also want to talk to your company’s legal department and see whether they have some disclaimer they want you to include on your blog. Don’t just assume but actually take the time to speak to others within your organization before you do something unwise.

■ Sort out all the ownership issues in advance – meaning if you leave the company, does the blog belong to you or to the company you work for? What will happen if a new product idea described on your blog actually goes into production? Do you have your company’s permission to blog on their time and using their equipment? All of these are issues to be sorted out.

■ Find out if your company has an official policy on blogs – and if not, ask if you can participate in developing one. You’re better off getting everything out in the open early rather than letting problems sidetrack your efforts at a later stage.

■ Find out whether your company has a “one voice culture” – where only certain employees are allowed to communicate with the outside world. If it does, it will be very difficult for you to develop an interesting blog. If your company is averse to letting employees put their face in front of the brand, then blogging will be difficult to do. Many people dislike a one-voice culture but if that is your organization’s reality, you’ll just have to find a way to work with it.

“The best course to take as an employer is to give employees guidelines under which they will have the freedom and incentive to become world-class bloggers. Make it clear you trust your employees to blog smart. Define the taboos in your company membrane. Then step back and let them say what they want. From time to time, some will be critical of company products or policies – and they’ll do it right out there in the open where your customers, competitors, and the media can see it. And all of those people will see the openness and tolerance of your company culture. Blogging create a general perception
of an enlightened employer, one what wants to hear constituent opinions and is willing to adjust course accordingly. The blogosphere champions these companies, and so will your customers. The PR benefits are significant and long-lasting. Prospects see the kind of company they’d like to join, and employees feel they are being heard with greater strength than the company suggestion box implies.”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“Have your PR department, R&D team, sales and marketing staff, and other executives feed information to your bloggers. Treat them as insiders and influencers. Fill them in on confidential background information that lets them see the company’s intended direction. Instead of trying to speak in a single, contrived voice, your company will sing with many voices, and they will all sing in harmony.”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

For better or for worse, business blogs are here to stay. Companies need to figure out how to incorporate them into the way they communicate because in the current era, conversational marketing is far more effective than mass advertising. Companies that win don’t just force-feed their clients with endless amounts of scripted advertising but actually engage in two-way conversations. They make their executives accessible and approachable. They allow people to complain when things go wrong and detail what they’re doing to set the situation right. How blogging will evolve in the future remains to be seen but one thing is very certain – blogs will be an essential business tool in the future.

Running a blog may well become one of the most powerful business communication tools of the future. It has now reached a tipping point where blogging will become much more accepted as a smart thing to do rather than a passing fad. More and more companies now see blogging’s huge potential and have begun to adapt blogging to business needs.

Pure and simple blogging works because it enables conversations to go global. It wrestles control away from the gatekeepers and places it firmly in the hands of the customer. Even better, blogging eliminates geographical boundaries – it allows people with similar interests to interact even if they live on opposite sides of the world.

Human culture has always changed and evolved around story-telling and conversations. In that context, blogging can be considered as supercharged story-telling and intensive conversations. How technology will evolve in the future is always hard to see from our present vantage point because technology always has a way of surprising., But it’s safe
to forecast blogging will be part of the mix. Consider some of the new technologies now under development which will further enhance and bolster the blogging trend in the future:

- The availability of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) technology is quite far reaching. With RSS, you can subscribe to a blog and be advised when something new has been posted as it happens. That means the information you want in the future will come to you rather than having to be searched for as at present. RSS search engines will mean you will be able to see what people all over the world are saying about the product you’re thinking about buying before you make a purchase decision, which could generate some profound benefits.

- RSS also means you can choose when you want to receive information and when to stop. It is user driven rather than marketer driven – meaning you won’t receive an ongoing stream of unwanted messages just because you gave your e-mail details to some database marketer who then sold your name to someone else and so forth.

- Blogs can work hand in hand with “podcasts” – in effect audio versions of blogs which are delivered electronically. Video blogs or vlogs are also in the formative stage of development. All of these technologies will use the Internet to deliver low cost but high quality communications to potential customers.

“After nine months of research and talking to more than 100 people in business, we are now convinced that blogging is a tool of a very significant revolution, one that has become virtually unstoppable, something that shifts the balance of relationships between companies and the communities in which they operate. As was the case in the dot-com area, a few companies will emerge from the blogosphere to become giants, while many others will fade. Because of this revolution, businesses will shift where they invest resources – both financial and human – as a matter of cost effectiveness. Marketing budgets will be cut, and perhaps more money will be redirected to both product development and customer support. We have already witnessed the meteoric shifts in who influences markets and why they do it. Not all prominent non-blogging companies will decline or fall. But most will be perceived in the public eye as less interesting or relevant than those that do.”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“We’re not quite certain what to name this revolution. We’ve heard this phenomenon referred to as conversational marketing, open-source marketing, two-way marketing, even corner grocery marketing. We think they all fit, and maybe it’s indicative of this new marketing that a single name has not emerged. No one has seen fit to brand it, yet so many people understand and care about what it is about. As in every revolution, there will be casualties. In this case, we think many will be the incumbent proponents of one-way, command-and-control broadcast marketing who argue that things are just fine the way they are. We predict their demise without glee. We do not argue that marketing in itself will or should perish – only the broadcast aspect of it, the part of it that says, ‘We talk. You listen.’”

– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“It’s natural enough to think of the growth of the blogosphere as a merely technical phenomenon. But it’s also a profoundly human phenomenon, a way of expanding and, in some sense, reifying the ephemeral daily conversation that humans engage in. Every day the blogosphere captures a little more of the strange immediacy of the life that is
passing before us. Think of it as the global thought bubble of a single voluble species.”
– New York Times editorial, August 5, 2005

“Blogging impacts marketing but also transcends it. Blogging is vital not just to outbound communications, but inbound as well. It is a crisis firefighter, a superior research aggregator, a tool for recruiting, a product builder, and customer service and support enhancement. It provides two-way executive access and facilitates employee relations, customer evangelism, and interaction between companies and their constituents. We have not dreamed of the ways it will benefit companies in the future.”
– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“Ultimately, blogging has ended one era and ignited another. In this new era, companies don’t win just by talking to people. They win by listening to people as well. Blogging is impacting businesses of all sizes in most parts of the developed world. It has made the world a smaller, faster place. And business is the better for it.”
– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

“Blogging is storytelling and conversation on steroids.”
– Robert Scoble and Shel Israel

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