

Blog It!

**Giving Voice to Your
Business and Connecting
to Customers**

BY J. D. BOOTH

Just when you thought you had the Internet pretty much under control.

Now there's blogging.

And not only blogging—the oh-so-techie contraction for “Web logging” that's become the rage online, even to the point where it's given way to such terms as “blogosphere.”

The phenomenon, if you can give something that's growing at the rate of 40,000 new blogs *per day* such a label, has spilled from a world inhabited by those glued to keyboards and computer monitors to the world of mere commerce—the “executive” or “business blog.”

Even in that sphere—okay, blogosphere—there are distinctions.

For proof, consider two automotive-related blogs.

One, “thefirehouse.biz,” is a “just for media” creation of DaimlerChrysler's Chrysler Group (a virtual extension of the automaker's success in temporarily converting a downtown Detroit firehall into a social gathering for journalists during Media Days at the North American International Auto Show).

Launched in September 2005, the blog is the brainchild of Jason Vines, Chrysler's vice president of communications, whose “voice” is typically used in postings.

Ed Garsten, who's worked in print and radio and was once CNN's Detroit-based correspondent, is now working as a contractor to Chrysler, helping to manage content for the blog in an environment he likens to the early days of CNN and the launch of Headline News.

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a point of contention, says Garsten, especially in the Internet, a world that's "open" by nature.

"It was the most controversial part of the project," says Garsten. "We got flamed pretty hard. But once we explained our philosophy, that we want to encourage journalists to feel they have a safe haven, people started to understand. It's going to be a tight circle, with people who honor the privacy of journalists."

Another perspective is that taken by General Motors with its "Fastlane" blog (fastlane.gmblogs.com—with no www), which features posting from vice chairman Bob Lutz.

And some pretty brutal comments, although they're mixed with positive missives about GM and its auto strategy.

Jud Branam, managing director of Ann Arbor-based Haas MS&L, the public relations agency that manages GM Fastlane, says although comments are screened before posting, it's for profanity and legal issues, not to sanitize.

"We don't refrain from publishing just because it's critical."

It's also not about everything GM.

"It's not about company finances or bond ratings," says Branam. "This blog has a focus."

It's the idea of that focus that intrigues consultant Toby

Bloomberg, who, as an example, cites "Open for Discussion," a blog featuring Bob Langert, McDonald's senior director for social responsibility.

The blog features one aspect of McDonald's business," says Bloomberg, who's based in Atlanta but travels extensively, all while doing her best to keep track of a blogosphere that's morphing almost daily. She recently visited Detroit to speak at a blogging seminar hosted by Inforum.

She could talk for hours on what's new and what's hot, but even more important than the examples are the principles every business should adopt if and when they

begin blogging.

“The first one is honesty,” says Bloomberg. “As far as the culture will allow, there needs to be transparency or it won’t be successful.”

It’s also about long-range thinking and having a strategy.

“If you’re not interested in the topic, you’re going to get bored and stop.”

Even more important, Bloomberg says successful blogging at the business level needs to support a company’s brand or strategy.

“Is it going to support a business challenge or marketing strategy? That’s important as well.”

Indeed, just deciding on “whether to blog” is one of the first questions a company executive ought to be asking, says Ted Demopoulos, another consultant and co-author of “Blogging for Business: Everything You Need to Know and Why You Should Care” (Kaplan, February 2006).

“Someone should not be starting a ‘we need a blog’ blog,” says Demopoulos.

Another “don’t” echoes Toby Bloomberg’s “honesty” missive: a business blog has to be the authentic voice of the person talking to the audience, not a “produced” voice.

Demopoulos points to a short-lived blog from Captain Morgan Rum (www.thecaptainsblog.com) as an example of writing that’s both slick and unbelievable, with most of the postings smacking of blatant promotion, not customer dialogue. (While still “live” at this writing, the last posting is dated April 10, 2005.)

Demopoulos says business bloggers should resist the initial urge to launch a blog (deceptively simple at any number of free or next-to-free sites, Google’s www.blogspot.com among them), and instead first do the kind of research they’d conduct before launching any other product.

“That includes reading blogs in their own field, competitors certainly, but others as well,” says Demopoulos. “Get an idea of what’s out there.”

And plan.

“A blog is really a part of a communication plan, not with a strict editorial calendar, but you should at least have a few key areas you want to cover,” he says.

If a blog, business or otherwise, sounds like a publishing venture, that’s not far off, something that, like any other publication, has its legal implications as well.

Lance Koonce, a partner with Davis Wright Tremaine

LLP, which specializes in privacy and security issues, has his own blog—www.privsecblog.com—and advises clients on what they should—and shouldn’t—be posting.

“Defamation libel is the category people should be most concerned with, especially business defamation, where someone can libel a corporation just as easily as an individual,” Koonce says.

Even indirect comments posted on a blog can cause issues.

“Veiled comments can be just as problematic as direct ones,” he says. “Sometimes people can become a little too clever for their own good.”

Koonce says the nature of the beast can sometimes be to blame.

“Blogging is somewhere between sending an e-mail and publishing a press release,” he says. “It’s not dashed off as quickly as an e-mail but it’s still done fairly quickly. I tend to caution executives who are blogging to treat the post as more like a press release.”

His own firm uses an internal process of review before postings are made, something he says may be desirable for more companies entering the

blogosphere.

“Think twice and then think again before you press ‘publish,’” says Koonce.

He also says responding to other people’s postings should be done with caution.

Koonce says there are two ways of responding, one by engaging in the conversation outside the blog, either by e-mail or phone, the other by answering a question or comment like one would do so at a press conference.

“These are public questions and public responses.”

One of the computer industry’s notables is Jonathan Schwartz, COO of Sun Microsystems, an inveterate blogger himself (www.blogs.sun.com/jonathan) who, writing in Harvard Business Review (November 2005), offers one of the most compelling arguments for executive/business blogging.

“Remember when, not long ago, CEOs would ask their assistants to print out their e-mails for them, and they’d dictate responses to be typewritten and sent via snail mail? Where are those leaders now? In 10 years...having a blog is not going to be a matter of choice, any more than using e-mail is today. If you’re not part of the conversation, others will speak on your behalf—and I’m not talking about your employees.” ■

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