

Blogs: Beyond A Corporate Handshake

Blogs, the interactive strategy with the funny name, are adding a spin to the traditional business paradigm. Moving beyond teen diaries, gossip columns and political campaigns, they have become the newest corporate communication channel. However, behind the mystique and hype is a simple, old-fashioned strategy. Peel away the high-tech wrapping and you'll find that a blog is a handshake with the customer.

There are two sides to that handshake — customer and corporation. With the onset of mass marketing strategies, many companies forfeited the ability to know clients as individuals. And in a company's speed to market, consumers also lost the means to form trusted relationships. Frequently internal processes insulate employees, especially C-level staff, from what may be considered customer intrusion. Even if an average customer finds his way through the maze of voice mail or wins the game of telephone transfers, chances are that a conversation with a manager in product development or the

chairman of the board is still off-limits.

Blogging strips away traditional gatekeepers such as public relations departments and administrative assistants. Within the world of a website, people connect directly with each other. There is no carefully crafted media release, PowerPoint presentation or TV commercial. It is the viewpoint of the blogger that influences the tone of these dialogues.

For some companies, the opportunity to engage in less formal customer interactions is an intriguing concept. Others are shaking in their corporate boots about the lack of control.

No doubt about it, there is an inherent risk in allowing unfiltered conversations to take place in the very public forum of a blog. What will happen if customer communication is turned over to staff members without internal edits? Will the brand be compromised? Will negative comments impact sales? Can employees, even the CEO, be trusted to represent the company fairly? Can a company have honest discussions without compromising a

competitive advantage?

Within the environment of their corporate cultures, companies are addressing these challenges. Some companies are testing the waters by launching internal blogs. Others have jumped into the game. Intuit, Maytag, Microsoft and Sun Microsystems are early adopters that are effectively leveraging blogs to open the doors of communication wider. Macro-media, one of the first to market, employs blogs to test new product concepts.

The most successful blogs are those with a specific focus or niche. Indium Corporation, a global electronics assembly materials firm, launched a blog to reach a unique customer segment. Blog marketers are convinced that blogging builds stronger relationships because companies and customers can share insights and feedback

Additional uses include building brand awareness, increasing search-engine optimization and crisis management. Blogging can also help create anticipation for a new product launch and help persuade retailers to put the product on their shelves.

Blogs are also a powerful strategy for reinforcing thought leadership positioning.

Several genres of blogs have emerged, including those written by Fortune 1000 CEOs. These blogs provide direct access to thought leaders, so it's not a surprise that they are some of the highest-traffic sites in the blogosphere. General Motors' FastLane Blog (fastlane.gmblogs.com) has become a source of informal research. Would you like to give the GM your opinion about its latest model? Drop a comment on Vice Chairman Bob Lutz's blog. Chances are he will respond to your concerns.

As important as participating in blog conversations may be for executives, listening to what

is being said is critical. The Internet has turned the tables on business. Consumers can find information at the click of a mouse. E-mail, message boards, listservs and especially blogs are word-of-mouth marketing on steroids. Make no mistake, people are talking about your products, services and employees.

A quick search of your company on a blog engine such as Technorati (www.technorati.com), PubSub (www.pubsub.com) or Feedster (www.feedster.com) might leave you surprised at the extent of the conversation. These indices are individually tracking approximately 12 million blogs.

Where would you prefer that those conversations take place? On a competitor's blog?

On a non-company-sanctioned blog like Starbucks Gossip (starbucks.gossip.typepad.com)? Or on your company's blog, where you can correct misunderstandings, answer questions and become a key player in the conversation?

Blogs may have a few growing pains to go through before they are accepted as a mainstream business communications vehicle. However, through blog discussions, thought leaders, connectors and influencers are impacting the perceptions of brands and, in turn, customer retention and acquisition. Whether your company is blog-ready or not, monitoring the blogosphere should be part of your company's competitive strategy. **BtoB**