

Blog your way to the top

Blogs are a great way for brands to position themselves as thought leaders and increase their reach, says **Lucy Fisher**. But don't just blog for blogging's sake

The term 'blog' was a buzzword in marketing, advertising and communications circles many years ago. However, it's not a concept that has fallen off the radar, rather one that many business brands have been working on quietly in the background. Now, with a company blog pretty much a must-have accessory for many businesses, how can B2B marketers get the most out of them?

"When the whole social media thing started, writing a blog was a bit of a bandwagon," says Charlie Thorogood, copywriter at agency Mason Zimble. "People got a blog but didn't necessarily know why." It's important, then, to ask yourself what you are trying to achieve. Is your company blog purely for promotional purposes, for use as a vehicle for broader industry comment, or both?

Moreover, with so many business brands now boasting blogs, it's important to position your company's voice in such a way that will cut through the clutter. "You may need to come at things from a slightly controversial angle," advises Thorogood. "That kind of approach generates debate and gets people linking to your blog."

Be sincere

It's not enough to incite controversy in blogs. You have to believe in what you are saying, or any insincerity will come across and almost certainly turn people off. What's more, if you're writing about topics you are genuinely passionate about, you are far less likely to struggle to generate content. The litmus test is to ask yourself whether you would genuinely be interested in what you are writing. If the answer is no, why would anyone else be?

Phil Jones, UK sales and marketing director at global office technology manufacturer Brother, is an active blogger in his spare time. He says that his personal blog, about road cycling, has proved a valuable test-bed for ideas and

approaches as he puts the finishing touches to the Brother blog, due to launch any time now. Jones says that it is extremely simple to get started with blogging – especially since platforms such as Blogger and WordPress are available for free. But the major challenge, he says, is deciding whether what you have to say will be of any value to others.

"Lots of small or medium-sized businesses have no idea what blogs can do for search engine visibility"



PHIL JONES
UK SALES AND
MARKETING DIRECTOR
BROTHER

Another challenge is finding the time and the energy to keep going with your blog. "It's hard work but if you're still blogging after 100 days, you'll probably make it," he says. "The first time I started, it fizzled out and I stopped for six to nine months. Then when someone told me they really liked my posts, I started again and never stopped."

"It does take a while to find your style, and decide upon your key topics," he adds. "And remember that if your content is too random you'll never really break through the clutter on the search engines."

Yet despite acknowledging that they demand a lot of hard work to keep up the momentum, Jones is a firm believer in the power of blogs. He believes that they represent an untapped marketing tool for businesses of all sizes. "Lots of small or medium-sized businesses have no idea what blogs can do for search engine visibility," he says.

Don't blog for blog's sake

Unfortunately, some companies have become so keen on using blogs to boost their rankings in the search results that this has come at the expense of the content. Keywords and links are sometimes sprinkled so liberally that the value of the content gets lost, with readers being directed to other sites that may not be of interest to them. This can be annoying and put an audience off returning to the blog altogether.

A blog must always be viewed as a genuine communications channel and not be approached in an overly calculated or controlling fashion, warns Tim Gibbon, director at communications consultancy Elemental. "By all means look at how to make it search-friendly, but do so in an ethical way, so that the focus remains on delivering what the audience is interested in. It should be about sharing knowledge, not thrusting stale messages out there," he says.

Experts also advise breaking up the text with images and video. Even in a business context your audience will not want to read something that is overly text-heavy, demands a lot of attention, or worst of all bores them.

Create connections

What is particularly crucial in a B2B context is to really know your audience. According to Rax Lakhani, director of Onlinefire, "It's better to have 50 really targeted readers than 5000 untaraged ones."

After all, the world of B2B needs to be even more targeted than B2C, where the numbers tend to be greater. As such, nurturing close connections with readers is crucial.

"Develop connections with people," says Lakhani. "Follow them on Twitter, link to groups on LinkedIn, and phrase your blog in such a way that it poses questions. Actively welcome people to leave comments." And it is sometimes a wise strategy, he adds, to initiate a conversation on a third-party blog, and then link back to your blog.

Integrate with other platforms

Blogging should form just one plank of a wider social media or digital marketing strategy. Emma Roffey, director, communications and digital marketing at Cisco, is keen to point out that Twitter is a great platform to amplify what you're saying on your blogs. She explains that Cisco views its blogs as part of a wider whole: Cisco has "dabbled with" LinkedIn, she says, and within Europe has 12 Facebook pages, 16 YouTube channels, 19 Twitter handles and 13 blogs.

"It's all part of an integrated communications mix now," Roffey explains. "The term 'trans-media engagement' is not a new concept but now with social and mobile it's absolutely crucial for brand storytelling."

Train, don't compel

With such a proliferation of social media platforms, large companies, in particular, have realised that training needs to be readily available inhouse in order for staff to be able to reap the benefits of these new channels. Often staff members are actively encouraged to blog, given that every individual should have something of value to contribute to debate.

"We host WebEx training sessions so staff can train in their own time," adds Roffey. "Just because it's social doesn't mean it's casual. It's important to remember that you are representing the brand at all times."

Some business brands have more prescriptive blogging and social media policies than others.

Steve Lamb, technology audience PR manager at Microsoft, says that the company policy is to 'blog smart'. "If you wouldn't be able to defend your claims if challenged by a senior executive, such as Bill Gates, don't post them. If in any doubt, ask a colleague," he explains. "But Microsoft's rules are quite open," he says. "In other companies the approach might be more controlled."

There are over 5000 bloggers within Microsoft. For these individuals, blogging is not their day job, but they have found

"Just because it's social doesn't mean it's casual"



EMMA ROFFEY
DIRECTOR, COMMUNICATIONS
AND DIGITAL MARKETING
CISCO

there to be some business benefit to blogging on behalf of the company.

Lamb himself, however, admits that he has found it a struggle at times to find the time to blog, despite seeing clear benefits in doing so. He says that he has been 'distracted' by Twitter lately but is keen to blog regularly again given the potential it offers to increase the reach of messaging. "Blogs tend to be more verbose than Twitter but they should not be too long – say 1000 words max," he adds. "They tend to be there for longer, whereas Twitter is a more rapid channel, where comments or conversations disappear more quickly."

Stick to the day job

Lamb advises anyone who wants to blog to view it as a means of facilitating existing tasks, rather than creating new ones. "For many, blogging is like a hobby that they want to get into, that quickly loses its appeal when they realise the commitment that is involved. My advice is to see it as a means of getting your work done," he says.

And, above all, don't force it. "Would you put your chief executive on stage and ask them to make an impromptu speech and be funny? I'd say perhaps not, unless that comes naturally," adds Lamb. Clearly it can do more harm than good to compel people to blog unless they are comfortable with it.

Blog like the big boys

How are well-established large corporates blogging? **Lionel Menchaca**, chief blogger at Dell, provides his top tips

- **Blogs are about fostering a two-way dialogue.** You have to listen to customers. It's important to look at comments, to see what people are discussing, and what questions people are asking. Look at what's happening on the web overall. Identify trends and what is driving conversation.
- **Offer a variety of voices.** You don't necessarily need your senior executives to be the voice of the brand. Offering a variety of perspectives makes it more interesting. Write from the heart and make sure that personality comes through. And always think about what's important to your customer. It's not just about what's important to you.
- **It's not always about being correct, either.** A blog is a different medium to a press release. You need to take into account other perspectives. When you fix problems, customers tend to be very loyal. So don't just stick to safe territory. Customers pick up on that.
- **Link to other blogs.** Don't write a post that doesn't link to other places. It may go against the grain to link outside your core property, but it's important. Links provide context. There's a broader discussion going on that you need to think about.
- **Use blogs to aggregate content.** Blogs are a great aggregator – a vehicle that can highlight content of value on other channels. For example, we have found there is real value in Slideshare, for sharing and discussing presentations. And YouTube is great for videos. With a blog, you can stitch all these channels together.