

# To Blog or Not to Blog...

Uh...what were those questions?

**What your company should consider before  
jumping onto the blogging bandwagon**

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## Jumping on the blog bandwagon, or not

### What about ROI?

*We're deliberately ignoring ROI in this whitepaper. ROI calculations are outside our area of expertise (we're not accountants). We encourage you to do an ROI calculation if you feel it would provide more of the information you need to make a decision.*

Bandwagons are lots of fun to jump onto: there are usually a lot of upbeat, excited people already there. Many of them are convinced the bandwagon is taking them to a lovely, special place where their dreams will be fulfilled. And possibly they will be. The problem is, when people are in a state of expectant dream fulfillment, they speak as if they've found the "one true answer." And if it's the one true answer, *everyone* should be on the bandwagon, right?

At Evo, we think you need a better basis for making a decision to blog or not. We believe *there are questions* people in companies can ask themselves, the answers to which may indicate whether or not blogging will help them achieve their goals. Blogging can enable people (and the companies they work for) to do great things. It can also be a complete waste of time. There is no ideal company profile by industry, size, or region that indicates the likelihood of successful blogging. In every case, that likelihood rests with an individual's (and their company's) ability and desire to have a successful blog. Blogging is not for everyone or for every company.

Make no mistake: we are blogging enthusiasts. We believe blogging creates opportunities for businesses that no other form of communication can provide. We also believe *effective blogging can be learned*, but only if circumstances support learning. This document seeks to help you determine if those circumstances exist in your company and if blogging is likely to benefit you and your company. There is no "passing score" for the number of questions checked (a positive indicator). It's up to you to determine both the answers and their bearing on your decision.

If you decide to blog, we offer some guidance and suggestions to help you get started on the right foot. Because getting started is the biggest step you'll take.

## How blogging can benefit your company

*Although the primary audience for this whitepaper is people in companies with layers of management, there is plenty here for people in smaller companies and individuals who are considering blogging.*

What do blogs do, exactly? What benefits can a company expect from blogging? And who brings the beer? No, wait. That was a question for a different audience. But speaking of audience: having an audience with whom you want to communicate is a fundamental requirement for blogging. In fact, ***blogging is all about your audience***. It's not about your company, or how great it is, or how great your products and services are. That's what your annual report and sales literature are for (and why so few people read them).

Because almost all blogs offer the opportunity for direct comments on individual posts, blogs must be considered instruments of personal communication. This ability for readers to comment (and the author and other readers to respond) is a fundamental feature and strength of blogs. What blogs can do that most other communications instruments cannot do is gather your audience together for communication between you and your audience, and between the members of your audience, with the possibility of forming a devoted community.


Devoted communities do not typically form because people are completely taken with what a company stands for or against, or how cool it is (Apple notwithstanding). They form because people feel the company can be counted on to *support them* and *what they want* to accomplish. Even Apple will lose its following should it regularly fail to live up to these expectations.

Not all companies can realistically expect their blog to incubate a devoted community, nor is that a useful goal for all companies that have a blog. There are many other benefits that are more important to most companies' success. The purpose of this whitepaper is not to discuss how to reap these benefits (and in some cases, there is a significant amount of "how-to" that

must be incorporated into your blog strategy and tactics), but we will list some of the benefits that are commonly acknowledged. Some of these, perhaps, are the basis for a future Evo whitepaper. In the meantime, online searches will reveal a great deal of information about how to accomplish most of these:

- Blogs are search engine magnets that can drive traffic to key areas of your company website.
- Blogs can gather sales leads.
- Blogs are a means of establishing thought leadership or expertise in your industry.
- Blogs are a means of building relationships with customers and prospects and improving customer interaction.
- Blogs offer the ability to communicate quickly on fast-breaking news, issues, or events.
- Blogs help build brand awareness and help define your brand.
- Blogs can educate your audience.
- Blogs can display video.
- Blogs are a low-cost marketing channel.
- Blogs can contain “hidden areas” just for your employees.
- Blogs help bloggers expand, organize, and crystallize their thinking regarding the subjects they write about (don't underestimate the importance of this one!).

## Challenges faced with company blogs

 When the question mark appears, you'll see one or more questions designed to help you determine if blogging for your company is likely to be successful. Check the box if your answer is yes (assuming you've printed out the whitepaper).

### Identifying your target audiences

Remember when we said blogging is all about your audience? We weren't kidding. Before you start blogging, you need to identify *all* your audiences, or at least the ones that matter to your company (buyers and influencers). All companies have at least two audiences: their customers and their employees. Most companies can categorize their customers into different groups. Prospective customers sometimes differ from existing customers enough that they also should be considered a separate audience. Influencers are people who might have some influence on your buyers in selecting your products or services: perhaps someone in a related industry. Take the time to figure out who the influencers are who have opportunities to recommend your company.

Once you've identified your audiences, identify the people in your company who work with them. Bring these coworkers into a room with coffee and donuts, and ask them to tell you what they know about customers and prospects. They will tell you stories: take notes. You want to hear what customers/prospects complaints are, what makes them happy about your company and industry, and what they wish your company offered that it doesn't. On your own, get some demographic information: age range, gender, income, geographic locations, etc.

You will use this information in two ways: a) to make sure you're writing posts aimed at the larger or more strategic groups that make up your audiences, and b) to help you identify keywords these audiences might use in a search when they search online for the products and services that your company offers.



### Target audience question

- Will you conduct some meaningful audience research, even though you (probably) believe you already know everything you need to know about your audiences?

### Two issues you must face squarely

Blogs are great for communicating directly with members of your target audience. Because it's direct communication, an authentic, person-to-person voice is required. And this brings us to one of the toughest problem companies face: using an *authentic voice* is no small challenge in an environment in which your boss and his/her boss will read and evaluate your posts. In a worst-case scenario, you might write with an authentic voice, and be required to modify it to sound "more formal" or "more like we want people to think about our company." As a result of such thinking, too many company blogs *pontificate* rather than *communicate*.

This is a short-term problem. People will soon stop reading your blog, and you can quit posting/pontificating. End of problem. Of course, that doesn't get you closer to any of the goals you had for your blog when you started, so it's not much of a solution.

Another problem companies must overcome to have a successful blog is *aggressively pushing the company's agenda(s)*. You may have started the blog in part to get leads to make sales, but your posts should not directly push for leads. Your posts should *focus on your audience's issues*, not on your sales lead problem. Sales leads result from making offers for free reports, signups for webinars, etc. A blog post can describe the content of a free report, talk about how it will solve one or more of their problems, and offer a link to the download, which may be preceded by the requirement to leave a name and email address. The focus of the blog post

should be *solving their problems*, not on solving your company's problem by getting them to leave their names and email addresses to get the report. Pushing too hard for what *you want* from your audience drives them away. And it's bad manners.



### Authentic voice and company pushiness questions

- Can the blogger or blog team members communicate to the audience in an authentic, person-to-person voice?
- If so, will the supervising managers or executives allow that voice?
- Can the blog be somewhat protected from demands from various departments (including the CEO) to push for short-term results or for solutions to problems they might be facing? (e.g., the sales department needs more leads right away, or the director of finance demands a post on customers paying their invoices on time).

### Who will be responsible for the blog and who will blog?

These questions call to mind the debates from the mid-90s about which department “owned” the company website. Often, the IT group owned the website, because it was seen primarily as a technology issue. With blogs, the technology is trivial. In our opinion, the communications group should “own” the blog and assume responsibility for coordination and implementation of the blog's strategic role in the company's communications efforts.

However, people with professional communications backgrounds are seldom the best bloggers. They may have spent years perfecting a formal style of writing to which blog readers don't respond well (i.e., they won't read it). Can an experienced PR writer become a good blogger? Yes, if they recognize this medium requires a different kind of writing that is as much about *connection* as it is about *information*. Otherwise, no. Bloggers can come from almost anywhere

in the company if they are able to view issues from the audience's perspective, write clearly, and are coachable on occasions when clarity, voice, documentation, or tone is judged problematic.

We recommend a blog team of four to six people, if possible, managed or coordinated by the communications department. Each team member can assume responsibility for different *topic areas of interest to the audience*, in which he/she has expertise. Each team member must understand that blogging is not something they do when they “have time” or feel inspired. They should make a deadline schedule for themselves in coordination with other team members, and they should understand what the term “deadline” means (occasionally slapping your palm with a riding crop while defining this term really gets people's attention, though we don't *officially* recommend it).

We'd also suggest offering rewards for things like “most unique pageviews” in a given month (this statistic is easily found in Google Analytics). And honor your bloggers internally: give them greater visibility and make them heroes within the company. It will pay off in more dedicated bloggers and better blog posts.

Blog posts of 500-800 words typically require half-an-hour to an hour to write and post, but there is often as much time involved in thinking about and taking notes for future posts (or posts that never materialize). A good company blog needs at least three posts per week, so having a team can lighten the load on any one individual.

The company may need to adjust a blogger's workload or responsibilities to enable him/her to blog at the necessary pace. We also recommend regular (weekly), short meetings of the blog team to discuss evolving customer challenges, company needs and goals, and posts responding to those issues. If a blogger is responsible for one post per week, 1-1 1/2 *uninterrupted* hours

for thinking and blogging, and another hour for interviews or meetings should be sufficient (interviews can make great blog posts: for instance, the blogger might interview the lead engineer for the company's latest widget). A blogger responsible for three posts per week would need approximately 3x that amount of time: 6-7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hours (and you thought because we didn't tell you how to calculate ROI, we couldn't do math!)



### **Bloggers and blog ownership questions**

- Is the communications or marketing communications department willing and able to “own” the blog, determining its strategy and managing its processes and activity?
- Is there at least one person in the company, or preferably a team, who can write interesting, authentic posts at least three times each week?
- Is the company willing and able to adjust a blogger's workload or responsibilities to allow time for blogging?

### **Dealing with negative post comments**

It is critical that a company allow negative comments to appear on their blog, provided the negative comments are in reference to something discussed in the blog post. If you delete all negative comments, word gets around, and both your blog and your company lose credibility (afraid to take the tough questions). You are not, however, obligated to publish rants against your company or industry or that do not take issue with something in the blog post.

For instance, if you are with an insurance company and publish a post about your insurance sales practices, you should allow negative comments on that post pertaining to your sales practices and treat them as opportunities to: a) learn more about how part of your audience thinks, and b) correct any erroneous assumptions or lack of understanding that might be

revealed in the comment. It's not necessary to turn their thinking around (you can't control that), but it *is* necessary to give their argument a fair hearing and thoughtfully explain your position. You will impress other people in your audience with this approach, if not your critic.

Above all, it's essential to remember that negative comments are not personal attacks, even though that's what they feel like. Respond with kindness and respect, or wait until you can. Other readers have been known to defend posts and bloggers from unfair comments. You can't count on it, but when it happens, you know you're doing something right.



#### Negative comments questions

- Is top management supportive of publishing negative comments when germane to the blog post to which they were made, recognizing that they represent opportunities to address issues in a constructive way rather than threats to the company's reputation?
- Can the blogger(s) be trusted to deal with criticism in post comments (warranted or not) in a constructive manner, without being rude or defensive?

## Evaluating your company culture for successful blogging

“Company culture” is one of those euphemisms that disguise the true meaning of what we’re talking about. In this case, what we’re talking about is how people in your company relate to one another and to your customers, prospective customers and influencers. If you’re lucky enough to be part of a company in which people regard each other and everyone with whom the company comes in contact with universal and unconditional respect and goodwill, you can stop here and start blogging (you also might want to find out what they’re adding to the water). Otherwise, you can use this section to figure out where some additional challenges may arise.



### General company culture questions

- Do you and your company like and/or respect your customers?
- Do you and your company like helping your customers succeed?
- Do you and your company have knowledge to share with your customers *that your customers care about?*
- Is there a willingness to engage with customers in a respectful and supportive manner?
- Is the ability and willingness to look at customers’ problems and challenges from their perspectives encouraged?
- Does the company value risk-taking and trying new things?
- Is the general atmosphere at your company encouraging and nurturing?
- Do most employees feel personally invested in your company’s success?

## ? Non-blogging boss questions

In companies with layers of management, the CEO is not likely to be a blogger, and bosses to which the blogger answers are not, either. Nevertheless, their attitudes about, understanding of, and support for blogging and its goals are critical to blogging success.

- Does the non-blogging boss understand and support the goals of blogging?
- Does the non-blogging boss trust the bloggers and the communications team managing the blog to communicate with customers and prospective customers in an authentic, person-to-person manner, knowing that they have the company's best interests in mind?

## ? Blogging boss questions

In small companies with few managers and no management layers, the owner of the company may be the blogger or part of the blogging team.

- Does the blogging boss understand the blog's focus and agree to stay on track, avoiding philosophical tangents or rants unrelated to the focus?
- Will the blogging boss make blogging on a regular basis a priority, meeting deadlines rather than blogging when there is time?
- Will the blogging boss accept criticism of posts with regard to clarity, voice, tone, or documentation, and make appropriate adjustments?
- Can the blogging boss deal with criticism in post comments (warranted or not) in a constructive manner, without being rude or defensive?

## Tolerance for imperfection

Nobody learns to blog in private; it's always on-the-job training. Your mistakes *will* be public (it's the Internet for cryin' out loud!) It's OK to want to do your best, but trying (or worse, expecting) to be perfect is a blog killer: it robs blog posts of their authenticity and vitality.

It's not that mistakes make a blog interesting, it's that *fear of mistakes* make it dull and lifeless. It also turns a one-hour blog post into a three- or four-hour blog post, as you (or your boss) agonize over the choice of every word and phrase. That's not good for productivity, and it will lose whatever support your boss has for blogging pretty quickly, even if it's your boss who's adding the extra time.

Try to keep in mind that they don't give Pulitzers for blog posts, and that your high school English teacher isn't part of your audience, hopefully. The goal is to deliver a nugget or two of useful information to your audience, not to be perfect, or to demonstrate your brilliance.



### Perfection is not the goal question

- Can you, your boss, and his/her boss make friends with the idea that occasional mistakes or other imperfections will occur in posts (with the understanding that they can be corrected quickly and easily if necessary), and that it's part of communicating with an authentic voice, *and that it's OK?*

## You've decided to launch a blog: now what?

### Recommended Links

<http://www.becomeablogger.com/>

<http://www.problogger.net/>

<http://www.chrisbrogan.com/>

<http://blogsearch.google.com/>

<http://www.wordpress.org/>

<http://www.google.com/analytics/>

OK! We didn't scare you off! Let's *briefly* talk about some important things you should do that will pay off as your blog becomes busy and a key part of your marketing and communications strategy. You can do these things yourself, get help from your IT people, or hire someone like Evo to do it all for you, delivering it in post-ready condition in a matter of days or weeks (depending on the complexity), with training on how to use the backend, and extended blog coaching if you like.

If none of the following makes sense, you probably shouldn't do it yourself. No doubt you can figure it out, but it will take *much* more of your time than you probably want devote to it.

### Wordpress.org

Wordpress.org is the version that you host on your webserver or on your webhost. Almost always, it can be on the same server as your company website, with a URL like: `blog.yourcompany.com` or `yourcompany.com/blog`. It takes a little more knowledge to set this up, but it's not difficult or time-consuming. If you have cPanel access, the chances are good that your webhost allows an easy install from there. The advantage of wordpress.org over the free-hosted versions of WordPress (wordpress.com), TypePad, or Blogger is that *you own your content*, and you have control over it. Also, it's a great platform with lots of flexibility.

### Get a free Google Analytics account

Install Google Analytics code on your blog to track your traffic. You can learn what content is most read, how many unique visitors, returning visitors, first-time visitors, where your traffic

comes from, what search words people use to find your blog, and a lot more. Your webhost probably has at least one analytics package, but Google offers one of the simplest to use, most powerful packages anywhere, and it gives you information that's useful to someone besides your IT group.

### **Install and tweak a theme that supports your brand**

Lots and lots of themes are available: none of them are perfect for your company right out of the box. Modifying themes requires a pretty solid understanding of CSS and may require some minor template modifications, possibly changing PHP code. It's important to go to the trouble, because your company blog needs to look professional, and it needs to support your brand. It *will not* (some say *should not*) precisely match your company website templates. Blogs function differently from your website, so sharing the same templates is not practical: a little like expecting your refrigerator to look just like your stove.

### **Use plugins you need, ignore the rest**

WordPress has lots of great plugins to add all kinds of functionality to your blog: polls, RSS feeds, modify how comments work, eliminate comment spam, slideshows, you name it! But don't get carried away and install plugins just because you *might* use them, or just because they're cool. Your blog will operate more efficiently if it's as lean and clean as possible.

### **Find places to promote your blog**

These include other blogs that have significant audience overlap, online communities where your audience participates in meaningful numbers (Facebook, industry communities or portals, etc.), and social bookmarking sites (Technorati, Digg, Stumbleupon, etc.). There are

lots of ways use these to promote your posts, but again, that's another whitepaper (or another 10-15 pages in this one). In the meantime, it's very possible to learn these strategies and tactics on your own, with the huge amount of information online (the difficulty may be sorting the good advice from the bad).

### **Make a list of keywords and audiences**

Remember the keywords we mentioned on page 6? That list should be tacked up next to each blog team member so they can quickly refer to it when they create a post. Work as many keywords into a post as possible without it sounding odd (you might be trying to attract searchbots, but you're still writing for people).

Next to the keyword list, keep a list with each of your audiences, with a short description of each. This will help you remember that your blog is *all about your audience*.

### **Two things to keep in mind**

1. Everything is difficult before it's easy.
2. The answer to all the problems mentioned in this whitepaper is *education*. Unless whoever is the source of the problem doesn't want to learn. There are no answers for that.

## Information

### About the author

Ray Gulick is a blogger, web designer, front-end developer, and small business owner. His company, Evolution Web Development (Evo), offers business blog design, implementation and consulting (WordPress), web design/development, and database and online applications development. Find more articles on Evo's blog, EvoBloggito ([www.evowebdev.com/blog](http://www.evowebdev.com/blog)).

Ray started his career as a high-school teacher/wrestling coach, then became a graphic designer/art director, electronic publishing manager, corporate marketing communications manager, design instructor at an art college, and finally, owner of a web design/development firm. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with his ever-patient wife, two teen-age daughters, and three rambunctious dogs that make great hiking companions.

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