

Weblogs: Realigning Business, Technology & Communication



the more you use it, the smarter you get.

Weblogs were started as an underground and alternative tool for self-expression but have become one of the most significant Internet developments since HTML. Often self-published, they are among the most well read pages on the World Wide Web, with a powerful voice and an influential effect. In fact, the voice has had such a far-reaching impact that it has been credited with fueling the publicity that led to the resignation of US Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott. And now, weblogs are poised to exert a similar impact on the world of business.

This white paper looks at the rise of the weblog phenomenon and examines its potential effect on business, and how businesses can harness this realignment of technology and communication. Weblogs will give rise to a new “generation” of authorities by making it easy to share meaningful information and content as needed, and at the fast-paced and often irregular speed of business.

Weblogs: Realigning Business Technology & Communication

From the Consumer to the Business World

The earliest weblogs were simple lists of URLs of new sites as they arrived on the web. Their evolution began with The National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), which introduced a “What’s New” weblog page. Shortly after, Netscape launched its own “What’s New” page, one of the most viewed blogs of the mid 90’s. The end of the decade brought the Internet explosion, an event that expanded and transformed our lines of communication, and it took weblogs along for the ride.

Structured like personal online diaries, consumer weblogs were the next stage of the evolution, giving individuals a way to share their most intimate thoughts and feelings. The writing was witty, irreverent, and often bombastic. Soon there was a whole Internet subculture of ‘blogger communities’ – crowding around each other’s most intimate thoughts and feelings like groupies around a table in a digital cafe. Slowly but surely, the most successful weblogs grew from one person’s need to share with a friend to one person’s ability to rivet the attention of hundreds.

Today, there are thousands upon thousands of weblogs. There are weblogs devoted to nothing but cataloging weblogs. Moreover, they're already evolving into a business tool that is beginning to gain strength in complementing current content-based technology. In the past, Internet publishing has lacked infrastructure and while there have been many information-rich sites, few have had a distinctive opinion or "voice." Weblogs provide a point of view and will generate power in the audiences that they inspire. The "voice" of a weblog will be the main point of interest and will create a following. The best weblogs will be those that create interest through relevant or insightful content and will gain strength not through a publisher-provided platform, but because of a resonating voice that compels attention. These blogs will inspire ideas and in turn, influence decisions, giving more individuals in a business setting strength and influence.

Periods of rapid change unleash new forces that Harvard Business School Professor Clayton M. Christensen termed "disruptive technologies" in his 1997 book, *The Innovator's Dilemma*. Already a new and emerging technology, weblogs have potential to be a disruptive technology. Their self-publishing advantages are changing how individuals and companies are digitally communicating and collaborating. They make the amount of time and money companies now invest in traditional online development seem excessive and wasteful. And they're making a lot of webmasters nervous. If anyone can build, populate and update a weblog, what does that mean to the future of conventional web development?

Small companies can design and deploy a weblog in a matter of days without incurring outside resource costs. *CNET Radio*, an all talk, all technology radio station in the Bay Area, uses a weblog to extend the audience experience to the Internet. *CNET Radio's* weblog posts upcoming events, teases the next on-air topics and weekly posts its Free Plug Friday – a list of sponsors currently running radio commercials on the station.

In addition to CNET, there is a growing core of companies that have started to use weblogs to strengthen communications with customers and constituents. In mid 2002, The New York Times posted its weblog, a continuously updated list of news headlines from around the world. Macromedia, the software maker of Flash and Cold Fusion began to use weblogs in the wake of multiple software releases so that it could effectively field questions and concerns from developers and customers. Other well-known companies that have begun to implement weblogs into their communications

strategies are Shell, which has a weblog with forums dedicated to the environment, security, technology and society, Jupiter Media, which was the first to deploy weblogs for individual research analysts, and the Drudge Report, an online up-to-the-minute news source.

Weblogs, whether they're for business or pleasure share two basic components: Regularly updated content about the main topic of the weblog and a list of links to the site's regular community members – usually along the side of the screen. This encourages discussion and idea-sharing, which is one of the stickier reasons to keep coming back. The adoption rate of weblogs continues to go up commensurately with additional, anyone-can-do-this applications. Primalrecords.com, an online music retailer, has a fully transactional weblog that functions as smoothly as a conventionally developed web site. Of course, the all-telling clue that weblogs are really coming into their own as accepted business media is how many now carry advertising.

Business Blog Strategies – Early Adopters

As with any new technology, the more progressive companies are the early adopters. They have the vision to look beyond the initial rudimentary application and appreciate a self-publishing tool that will significantly change how we communicate and collaborate. For example, every organization has vast stores of intellectual capital idling away in the minds of its leaders and top managers. But the ability to share it has been limited by conventional forms of communication: Meetings, reports and presentations. Email certainly opened up the lines to two-way discourse, but unlike weblogs, the exchange does not build on itself. Moreover, it's generally one-at-one communication, often with no expectation of dialogue beyond a single reply. Web sites, and extranets in particular, have the technology for targeted community building but they're clunky dialogue tools, requiring HTML programmers to cut and post all the content and a certain amount of hosting support.

Now companies are encouraging staff members to self-publish professional weblogs, thereby doing an end run around the walls that have prevented free range business discussion on the Web. No battling for representation on the company site. No request forms for content changes and updates. Equally important, the weblog's self-publishing technology automatically democratizes the use of the web. Typically, one department is

responsible for managing and maintaining the Internet. If it's marketing, then it's a good bet that the majority of the company's online efforts will be devoted to marketing. Weblogs give every department, and every individual in every department, the ability to leverage the Web according to his or her needs. Plus there's a certain element of personal power that's hard to deny. Suddenly the best thinkers have their own digital voice that they manage and control themselves.

To that end, weblogs are proving that proactive employees are hungry to try something new. Especially if it can dramatically enhance their effectiveness. Salespeople are creating tight, weblog-based communities with like-minded customers. R&D specialists are building weblog communities with colleagues within the company and with industry peers at large. One book retailer uses a weblog as a less expensive and more effective way to host an author appearance. The author is given a web address to a branded template that is ready and waiting for content. A few sentences gets the discussion thread going and within minutes readers are reviewing characters, discussing plot lines, asking questions and sharing perspectives with others interested in the same book.

From Knowledge Management to Sales

One of the most significant outcomes of all is how weblogs are changing the process of Knowledge Management. Weblogs can archive themselves and eliminate the need for a cumbersome e-library. They can be searched by publisher or by topic. More importantly, they are turning knowledge management from a lump of information that resides on a distant server into a real-time, dynamic exchange among certain groups. Example: A large packaged goods company can have a weblog, published by the senior product manager, for every product – a perpetually “live” communication destination for sales, marketing, and R&D teams. Every morning, the product managers post updates right from their desktops (they can even do it while they're on the road). The rest of the product's weblog community can then check in and review sales numbers, post manufacturing issues, suggest improvements, review upcoming marketing rollouts, and check inventory thermometers. Other forms of “meetingware” can enable these tasks. But the key here is that there is no need for technical support. This is practical knowledge management. And weblogs are the perfect tool for keeping the discussion live and on the surface of daily life at the office.

Weblogs are already enabling salespeople to create tighter relationships with customers by establishing ongoing dialogue threads. These threads can be opened up to include more of a customer's stakeholders on a particular buying decision, or more of the salesperson's internal advisors. Imagine a salesperson sets up a weblog for each major customer. Every morning, or every week, he or she types a short paragraph into the content field of each weblog – news about product enhancements, troubleshooting tips, upcoming promotions. The customers can read them and respond at their convenience, they feel connected and relevant and have a personal, one-to-one persistent dialogue that can be dropped off and picked up at any time. All the salesperson has to do is check the responses regularly to maintain his or her end of the discussion. This helps in timing new product presentations, identifying issues and potential problems, sharing new industry thinking - all in a format that is as personal as a phone call.

Or take the case of an electronics engineer who is responsible for parts availability in a large company that manufactures patient monitoring devices. He's part of a team developing a new heart monitor. Using a weblog, he can tap the experience and knowledge of the rest of the company's engineers, even those in Germany and California, as he goes about designing and subcontracting components for the new device. Before, this type of professional knowledge exchange would be discouragingly time-consuming and disjointed. Now, instead of phoning or emailing one engineer after another until he finds the one with the appropriate knowledge, he can micro-broadcast his weblog to the company's engineering community at large. The other engineers can answer at their convenience, which makes their participation more likely in the first place, and there's a forum for productive discussion. What if two engineers differ on the solution, or both have viable answers? Now the entire group can cluster around the weblog and help determine the answer.

Marketing organizations in particular will appreciate a recent use of weblogs to conduct research. Normally, 5-10 people are called into a "focus group" to share thoughts and reactions to everything from product ideas to advertising campaigns. A weblog can generate the same kind of "live" discussion without actually requiring people to gather in one place. Not only does this mean significant production savings, but the responses tend to be more thoughtful and more honest. One company posted a proposed advertising campaign and "sistered" it to a weblog so participants could easily view and respond. Afterwards, all the researcher had to do was review the dialogue thread. There

was no need to videotape and transcribe. It had already been done *de facto* - just because of the weblog format.

The value of a weblog is only limited by the imagination. Of course, in order to be actually adopted, weblogs have to prove their worth not only in marketing, sales and R&D, but in accounting, too.

Measuring Business Value

Every company that uses weblogs calculates their value in different ways: For example, what is the return on community? What is the relative cost in time spent creating and updating a weblog to the goal at hand? For the engineer building the heart-monitoring device, the weblog provides him with the answers he needs to do a better job. This in turn helps speed the device to market.

The retail bookstore, on the other hand, realizes value by giving customers a reason to come back. Their weblog builds true brand loyalty by giving readers a chance to interact with a favorite author. Not only does the weblog format encourage higher attendance than an on-site event (people can drop in at their own convenience, from their desktops at home), the retailer saves the cost of traveling the author from store to store for face-to-face appearances. Equally important, the weblog supplants the need for offline direct marketing. Customers interested in joining the author's discussion can be reached via email or simply by posting an event notice on the company's main site. Weblogs save companies millions of dollars by eliminating the need for more costly, paper communication.

The value of weblogs as critical marketing tools will only increase as they begin to include the deep analytics that are available in other forms of online marketing. Tracking and monitoring what viewers are reading and responding to results in a database of the most useful kind of customer information: individual and group behavioral trends that are based on interest in certain topics and sub-topics (versus information that is only demographic in nature). This enables companies to hone specific content and promotions for very high interest micro-audiences, which can then be delivered via the weblogs at a fraction of the cost of conventional offline and online marketing. The data gathered can also be mined and shared for future product development.

Taking the First Steps

So how does a company begin weblogging? A few simple steps are all it takes.

1. Start with a short, but explicit plan for what you want to accomplish with your weblog(s). Better customer relationships (measured by repeat sales)? A more collaborative marketing effort (measured by faster development time)? Thought leadership (measured by increased demand for commentary and publicity)? Efficient recruiting (measured by faster candidate pool for lower posting/advertising costs)?
2. Identify the right publisher(s). Your top salesperson. The head of R&D. It could be anyone who can exact business value from an online community. Just make sure he or she is articulate and committed to the idea. Look for extroverts.
3. Find a weblog template that can be branded with your company's logo. Weblog applications for corporate deployment are showing up in do-it-yourself kits that can be up and running in as little as half an hour.
4. Provide each internal weblog publisher with a set of weblogging standards. These include confidentiality policies, product disclosure guidelines and basic dos and don'ts (i.e. – don't refer to customers by name unless they want you to. Do update the thread on a daily basis.)
5. Whether you implement weblogs across a discipline (as in the packaged goods example we gave) or as a trial balloon, find a way to track their content and topics. This information can further pollinate sales and marketing initiatives, help the company prioritize subject matter and guide future weblog themes.
6. Use the weblog as a way to give your key people voice and power. It is a vote of confidence in them to ask them to publish. It will go a long way to demonstrating the company believes in them and their thinking.
7. Periodically "check-in". If participation in a weblog grows dramatically, find out why and learn from it. If participation drops dramatically, find out why and learn from it.
8. Allow the weblog to have a distinct voice and use it to strengthen the brand. One of its key advantages is the quick, constant exchange of bits of information that may not be substantial enough to belong in a newsletter. In doing so, the bond with clients is strengthened and new voices are heard.

Once a company has embraced the value of self-publishing, more and more uses for weblogs will become obvious. Five years from now, Corporate America will have completely normalized their use into virtually every aspect of daily business delivery. Weblogs may have started as an underground tool for freedom of expression, but the business world is quickly adopting them to liberate their intellectual capital, their product and service development, their salespeople and customers from the incredibly limiting modes of conventional offline and online communication.

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