

Beginners' Guide to Corporate Blogging



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Corporate Blog: A Definition

Blogs - an abbreviation of 'weblogs' - are published on the web, typically as microsites standing by themselves but today also as parts of traditional web sites.

They reflect the interests, thoughts and opinions of the person, sometimes persons, publishing the blog. Blogs are characterized by frequent updates, an informal tone and many links to other blogs and web sites.

A corporate blog is a blog published by or with the support of an organization to reach that organization's goals.

In external communications the potential benefits include strengthened relationships with important target groups and the positioning of the publishing organization (or individuals within it) as industry experts.

Internally blogs are generally referred to as tools for collaboration and knowledge management.

The Nature of Blogs

To understand blogging as a corporate communications tool, we must understand the nature of blogs (See page 3 for a basic definition).

You can find as many definitions and explanations as you like. In our opinion, these are the relevant distinctive features of blogs.

- The Personality
- The Voice
- The Links
- The Conversations
- The Frequency
- The Feed

The Personality

Blogs are not objective. They give you biased opinions, and you know it. In a way, they're much like reading letters from someone. After a while you can sense that person's values and interests, and you can't remove the person - the personality - from the equation. That would make both writing and reading pointless, or at least transform it to something else than blogging. People write blogs, not the Corporate Communication Department (but people working there can).

The Voice

Closely related to the above, a blog has a voice of its own. An author's voice. There's no template to use. A blogger must dare to be a person instead of an official and a voice will be heard. Most probably it will be an everyday voice; natural, direct and informal, maybe even funny or irritating. Blogging shouldn't be compared to journalism, but you'll find a similarity between Personality/Voice and the ingredients of really good newspaper columns.

The Links

Blogging has been called the Art of Linking and links are a major part of most blogs. As blog readers we want it. With the Web growing absurdly by the minute, we have no chance of keeping up. The blogs do that for us, in often very small niches. But it's not just the links - people have been putting together lists with links since the birth of the Web. With blogs we like, we

The Nature of Blogs

get the most interesting links with at least some degree of context.

The Conversations

You're not alone out there. There's always other blogs sharing your interests. You become a part of the conversation by linking to those blogs from posts of your own, stating your opinions, publishing related information or thoughts. If you do it well they link to you, and a kind of conversation between blogs has started. It's of course not necessary to actively try to converse, but most bloggers would argue that this is an important part of blogging.

The Frequency

Blogs are immediate, almost instantaneous. Blogs are at their best when you get the feeling that the blogger publishes as soon as he or she has something to say. As a result it's not frequent enough to publish once a month, even once a week. You might get some subscribers/readers, but you'll never become a voice they listen to, look forward to hearing from.

The Feed

This is tech stuff, and a blog can be defined by the content-related characteristics alone. But most blogs are published both on web sites and as so called feeds. You'll find more about this in the "Read blogs"-section.

That's what blogs are. What, then, are corporate blogs? A corporate blog is a blog published by, or with the support of, an organization to reach that organization's goals. Some would say this contradicts the original idea - that of the independent voice giving its views on the world, in a conversation with other independent voices. Probably it does. You must decide for yourself if that's development or degeneration.

Related links: <http://www.corporateblogging.info/basics/what/>

Reasons for Corporate Blogging

From a business perspective there are several potential reasons to blog. But, as always, it depends on what you want.

Blogs are no different from channels like video, print, audio, presentations and so on. They all deliver results - but of varying kind. The kind you can expect from blogs is mainly about stronger relations with important target groups.

- Become the Expert
- Customer Relationships
- Media Relations
- Internal Collaboration
- Knowledge Management
- Recruitment
- Test ideas or products
- Rank high in Search Engines

Become the Expert

Position yourself and your company as the thought leader of your business.

Customer Relationships

In a forum where your main objective is not to sell, you'll have a more personal relationship between you and your customers. Blogs are a fast way to join the customers' discussions, provide tips and insights or receive feedback.

Media Relations

It's every PR consultant's dream to create a channel where media regularly check what you have to say, instead of media just being passive - sometimes indifferent - recipients of press releases.

Internal Collaboration

Use blogs as a workspace where project members keep each other updated without wasting time writing reports or searching the Outlook inbox.

Knowledge Management

Blogs works in two ways. First of all, they're an easy way for the readers to find information and resources they want or need. That's obvious and could be used internally in many

Reasons for Corporate Blogging

organizations. Second, blogs are a kind of "university light" for the blogger. Blogging is on-the-job learning.

Recruitment

If you establish your company as a thought leader, people in your business will pay attention. They'll read and discuss what you have to say. Chances are good they will see you as an attractive employer.

Test ideas or products

A blog is informal. It's part of a conversation where people (often) can comment, and the blog can provide you with a measure of value. Publish an idea and see if it generates interest. Does anyone link to you? What do they say?

Rank high in search engines

Well, this has nothing to do with relations. But Google and other search engines reward sites that are updated often, that link to other sites and most importantly, that have many inbound links. Start a blog at your regular site and your ranking will boost.

Related links: <http://www.corporateblogging.info/basics/why/>

Six Types of Corporate Blogs

Corporate (or Business, Organizational) blogs can be classified into six different categories. Each category shares common characteristics and the blog content can be expected to differ between the categories.

Furthermore, there are differences in terms of target groups and purposes. Even if we also see hybrid forms where blogs are examples of more than one category, an organization that professionally incorporates blogging into its communications strategy will likely prioritize one purpose (for each blog).

CORPORATE (OR ORGANIZATIONAL) BLOGS

External blogs

- Sales blogs
- Relationship blogs
- Branding blogs

Internal blogs

- Knowledge blogs
- Collaboration blogs
- Culture blogs

Sales blogs - external

- Purpose: To market or sell products/services, make citizens aware of public services, get donations for charities or political parties etc.
- Blogger: The organization itself, or more specifically individuals within it writing on behalf of the organization.
- Target groups: (Potential) clients/customers and citizens, that is persons and/or other organizations that are directly involved with the publishing organization, or those it wants to reach with the purpose above.

Relationship blogs - external

- Purpose: To create, uphold or strengthen relationships.
- Blogger: The organization itself, or more specifically individuals within it writing on behalf of the organization.
- Target groups: Often smaller and more specified than with sales blogs. Examples are support blogs aimed at customers of a certain product, finance blogs for IR purposes, PR blogs for media, blogs trying to reach students, future employees, politicians/officials etc.

Six Types of Corporate Blogs

Branding blogs - external

- Purpose: To strengthen the brand, the profile, of the publishing organization or individuals within it.
- Blogger: Not necessarily the organization itself. Individual employees' or executives' blogging ("insider blogs"), if supported by the organization, can be viewed as a branding blog. The same goes for adverblogs and blogs that are not apparently connected to the organization.
- Target groups: See Relationship and Sales blogs.

Knowledge blogs - internal

- Purpose: To give employees information and insights relating to their work assignments; news, business intelligence, reports about ongoing projects etc.
- Blogger: The organization itself through one or more designated bloggers, or potentially all employees through a entirely open blog publishing model.
- Target groups: All employees with a certain interest.

Collaboration blogs - internal

- Purpose: To provide a working team with a tool for research, collaboration and discussion.
- Blogger: The team.
- Target group: The team.
(There's only a fine line - if any - between this blog category and business wiki's. You could also see for example Relationship Blogs change into more wiki-like publications.)

Culture blogs - internal

- Purpose: To strengthen organizational culture. Typically through informal content of social or non-work related character.
- Blogger: The organization itself through one or more designated bloggers, or potentially all employees through a entirely open blog publishing model.
- Target groups: All employees as employees, and not as professionals (developers, managers, assistants and so on).

Read Blogs

There are basically three ways to read a blog: Visit the web page, use an online news aggregator or download a reader.

Ordinary browsing doesn't need any explanation. If you can use a browser, you can read blogs.

Soon you'll discover more and more blogs you want to read. That's where the so called feeds will help you. Most blogs are published both on web sites and as feeds. To put it simply, the feed means that you don't have to visit the site to read its content. You can subscribe to updates and have them delivered to you.

The fastest way to start is with online news aggregators. They're really easy to use and you of course have the advantage of being able to reach them from any computer. I use - and recommend - Bloglines. Create an account and start subscribing to feeds.

Another option is to use news aggregators that you download and install in your computer. Search Google for "news aggregator" or "rss reader" and you will find many alternatives. Personally I like NewsGator that runs in Microsoft Outlook. Make sure that your aggregator reads both RSS- and Atom-feeds, if not many blogs will be out of your reach.

It's as easy as that.

Related links: <http://www.corporateblogging.info/basics/read/>



Publish Blogs

**You don't have to buy anything to start blogging.
You don't need to know coding.**

At least not to start with. The most well-known free blog publishing system is Blogger – www.blogger.com – and they also offer free blog hosting. It works fine and is fully customizable to fit your needs and design (but then you'll have to do some coding). You can integrate it with any site.

No doubt, free services pose a problem. You never know how long they will be free, or even available at all. What will happen to your data if they shut down?

Considering that our focus is corporate communications it's generally not a good idea to rely on free services, no matter if we're talking about blogging or other services.

That leaves you with two more options:

- Paying for a service like Blogger, e.g. TypePad.
- Buy a blog publishing system. An example of this is MovableType.

Just don't overdo it. While ordinary web projects always are technical to some degree, blog projects don't have to be. They shouldn't be from the start. If you've never blogged it's much more important to get to know the format. How does it work? How can you use it for business?

Related links: <http://www.corporateblogging.info/basics/publish/>

14 Steps to your Business Blog

You do it anyway you want to. But here's a list if you want to make sure that you think about all aspects of blogging before you start.

I could add a #0, though: Just do it. Never mind risks, lack of resources, communications strategies. Never mind what you are supposed to do in the blogosphere. It is a new world, a new communication era. And it seems quite easy to get a new job these days...

I'm not sure that would be totally wrong. A lot of good blogs have started that way. But here's the more traditional approach.

1. Start using RSS for news, jobs or press releases

Well, this you should do even if blogging isn't for you. But if you are going to blog you need to feel comfortable with this form of publishing - get used to the fact that you will have, hopefully, a lot of readers that never actually visit your site. For many with a background in traditional publishing (e.g. many communications directors...) this could be worrying.

2. Thoroughly study what a blog is

You have to know blogs to be able to decide on whether or not to start one. And not just "know" them as a reader of 5 or 10 different blogs. You should do rather extensive research. What are the distinctive features of blogs? What blogs are there in your business? What do you think the audience likes or dislikes about them?

With all this done you will still need to find your own tone and niche, and this will depend heavily on who the bloggers are. But you will know what it is like out there.

3. Be specific with purpose

Absolutely no one will be happy if you start a blog because you can. You need, as you would with all other communication channels, be very clear on the purpose.

"We will start a blog because..."

Just remember that a blog may fill other purposes than you are used to. A purpose like "some of our sales people want a less formal and sales focused forum to share their knowledge" is a brilliant start.

4. Ask yourself, do you really need a blog?

Why on earth would you want a blog? For the purpose above maybe a series of seminars would work just fine. If you have done your research and now know your goal, it is time to ask yourself if it's worth it. Do you have the culture of openness and honesty that

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blogging will demand from you? Are there any business risks, and are you prepared to take them?

5. Ask yourself, do we have the resources?

Just one word: Time.

6. Co-ordinate with other communication channels

Nothing strange here, you would never start a new channel without discussing and outlining its relationship with all the other things you do. If you are going to blog maybe the e-mail newsletter should reference the blog? Or be replaced by it?

7. Who's the blogger?

The Department of Corporate Communications does not blog. No organizational unit does. People working there do. You of course have to find people that want to, that wish nothing else but to, blog. In most real life cases I have seen this has actually been the starting point, and those people have been the advocates for the blog in the process we're talking about here.

8. Make a decision on all aspects, features of blogs

Will you allow comments? Will they be moderated by you? Is Trackback a feature to offer? What RSS versions? Atom, too? Categories or not? A blogroll, maybe?

Make sure you know what all these small peculiarities of blogs are and if you think they will help you.

And then you need to take some more important decisions. What will you write about and what is absolutely impossible to write about? Will you for example link to competitors? Tip: If you say no to this, start at #2 again...

9. Choose which tool to use

There are a lot of tools to compare, but if you have done #8 you know what to look for.

10. Create a blogging policy

Again, if you have done #8 you know what to put in this - you can get some guidance from others (see the web page of these 14 steps for links).

11. Make sure the blogger(s) know blogging

Blogging is a skill. Not a very unique one, but a skill. The blogger must first of all know how to write, and he or she should know how the blogosphere works.

14 Steps to your Business Blog

12. Launch quietly

Ideas and fine plans are one thing. But how does it turn out? Are the enthusiastic bloggers good enough to be very visible representatives of your brand?

I recommend you start low-profile. You could even consider to start behind the firewall or with a password-protected blog.

13. Start doing subtle PR

Don't issue a press release stating you have a blog. You wouldn't be the first to do it, but it never seems appropriate. There are other means.

14. Success or failure? Decide on the future of your blog

It doesn't take more than two or three months, from my experience, to find out if a blog is good enough to deliver results. Have you been linked to by other blogs? Is anyone commenting? Do you get feedback from your target group?

You also know how much resources the blog really demands by now, which means you have all the information you need to make a long-term commitment.

Or just give it up.

For related links on some of these steps, see

<http://www.corporateblogging.info/2004/09/14-steps-to-your-business-blog.asp>

What Corporate Bloggers Say

Testimonials

"With our blog, we have created a place where customers and prospects spend more time with our brand."

"I'm sharing my thoughts with them openly and honestly, and considering how rare that is in the modern world, it's no wonder that I'm able to translate blogging into business."

"While I hate the word, blogging can turn you into a guru quicker than any other way right now."

Read these and others at

<http://www.corporateblogging.info/testimonials/>

More corporate blogs

Want to see what others are doing?

- European Corporate Blogs
<http://www.corporateblogging.info/europe/>
- Business Blog Consulting
<http://www.businessblogconsulting.com/>
- CEOBlogsList
<http://www.thenewpr.com/wiki/pmwiki.php/Resources/CEOBlogsList>

Blogs to read

- CorporateBloggingBlog
<http://www.corporateblogging.info/>
- Dana's blog
<http://www.danavan.net/weblog/>
- Micro Persuasion
<http://www.micropersuasion.com/>
- Corporate Engagement
<http://trevorcook.typepad.com/weblog/>
- Scobleizer
<http://radio.weblogs.com/0001011/>
- Contentious
<http://blog.contentious.com/>

...and many, many more. Read a few blogs and you will find links to more blogs than you ever will have time to read.

About & Copyright

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I publish news and comments on the subject of this paper at www.corporateblogging.info on a regular basis. I started my first small business blog in 2000.



Please drop me a line if you have questions or thoughts about the potential of corporate blogging: fredrik@wpr.se.

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