



Guy Clapperton became an IT journalist in 1989. He has watched the rise of the Internet and its evolution into an entirely new medium with interest, writing about it for *The Guardian*, *Times*, *Daily Express*, *FT* and others along the way. He currently runs his own blog and has blogged for *The Guardian*, as well as presenting podcasts for them.

White paper

Blogging in Context

Blogging is new. Standing for 'Weblog' – the technology may have been around since very early this century but blogging as a widespread phenomenon is a very recent phenomenon. Using web facilities at MySpace, Technorati and elsewhere just about anyone can set up a blog.

Inevitably this means a lot of blogs are a waste of time to read, but it should not be assumed that the entire medium can be written off as a result. Many readers will remember, if not admit to, early cynicism about the Web. It was deemed to be full of the 'Hi, I'm Larry and this is my dog' school of content, and much of the discussion content centered around who was the better captain, Picard or Kirk. Nonetheless, each of those cynical business people who assumed there was no merit in the Web as a result will now acknowledge that it is essential as a business tool.

This white paper will therefore assume the existence of a lot of flippant, arguably time-wasting blogs and disregard them as an irrelevance. The quality blogs are likely to persist for some time.

1.1 The hype

There is clearly a lot of hype around blogs as this paper is being written. Much of this is, unsurprisingly, written by bloggers themselves. The typical upbeat picture of blogging portrays the medium as:

- A boon to democracy
- A new and exciting means of contacting and keeping in touch with customers
- A new form of 'citizen journalism'



Customers will indeed delight in keeping in touch with the right sort of company and there have been cases in which blogs have broken news stories...



Many of these have elements of truth in them. Anything that enables people to make a statement to an audience will indeed work in democracy's favour, although getting to a sufficiently large audience to make a difference is a difficult task. Customers will indeed delight in keeping in touch with the right sort of company and there have been cases in which blogs have broken substantial news stories – the Baghdad Blogger was well known for telling people what was actually happening in that war-torn city before anyone else had a chance.

1.2 The reality

However, the fact that one blog (and probably only one) can be singled out as making this sort of contribution speaks clearly about just how few of these blogs make a genuine contribution. Let's take the points above in sequence:

A boon to democracy – this might well be the case in places where democracy is under threat. It is, however, a tired view of the Internet as a whole – readers will remember

how the Web was going to democratise all of the media. It hasn't happened, mostly because the free media was pretty democratic in the first place. *Keeping in touch with customers* is indeed a possibility. *Citizen journalism* is also starting to look tired for reasons that will become apparent under 'Hazards' below. The Baghdad Blogger, it shouldn't be forgotten, was a professional journalist first.

2.0 Is it for you?

Assuming your company still wants to investigate blogging, there are a handful of questions that you will need to ask. First, will your organisation actually benefit? Many will, but there are a few criteria:

- Is your service or product a 'get and forget' item? If it is then a blog might not be such a great idea. If you make, say, sofas then consumers who have just bought one won't log on immediately to see whether they can get another – they already have one. Having said that, your wholesaler or trade outlet might well be interested.
- Do you have the means to put a blog together?

2.1 The IT industry

The IT industry has a number of features that make it more suitable for blogging than others. These include:

- A much more sophisticated audience. It can reasonably be expected that the readership of any IT company's blog will be less wowed by the fact of a blog in the first place than those of a less technically-literate group.
- Increased expectations: In order to be perceived as cutting-edge there is an argument that says an IT company ought to be seen to have a blog – preferably one that includes some sort of video or audio content. The same group of users who'll wonder why (for example) you're not using voice over IP for your phone will wonder why blogs have passed you by.
- A more suggestable readership: The IT-literate crowd, without wishing to generalise too much, are delighted to soak up information like a sponge. If you put a blog up about your technology they will be pleased to read it avidly.

3.0 The practicalities

In theory, the act of putting a blog together is simple. As a famous writer once said, you sit in front of a blank piece of paper (or screen in this case) and concentrate until your head bleeds. Seriously, the simple act of writing consistently is not as easy as might be assumed.

The mechanics are straightforward enough. Software such as Rapidweaver for the Mac or online tools such as Movable Type make blogging and integrating it with your existing website fairly straightforward. You then need to charge someone with the task of putting the blog together every day, every other day or however frequently you plan to upload.

This is the stage at which you need to sort out corporate messaging and to ensure that only authorised people upload to the blog – and that they know what they may and may not say. 'We're cutting costs and halving our wage bill' might look good to managers but to the people who're being made redundant it won't, particularly if they haven't been told officially yet. 'We're launching a special offer on the new iPod next week' won't look great if your sales manager has been instructed to get rid of the existing stock this week, and so forth.

The positives can be massive, though. If you have set the blog up well and your readers are engaged then you can have your latest communication on their desk within minutes rather than waiting for an advertising cycle to complete. You'll be seen as understanding new technologies and the customer should perceive whatever they receive as coming from you rather than filtering through some sort of PR second-source.

Essentially you need to decide what the blog is about and who is writing it, and to set some parameters.

Readers will expect to be informed and entertained; give them a reason to keep coming back and they'll be pleased to do so.

3.0.1 RSS

One means of getting people to come back is to incorporate an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed. Readers with the right technology will then be able to press your RSS button on the website and get a continuing feed of entries delivered to their desktop every time you update your entries.

3.1 Essentials

The major danger of blogging in a corporate environment is in losing the reader's attention. This can happen for any number of reasons but two are more avoidable than most:

- Telling the reader something they already know
- Telling the reader things too infrequently

The first can only be overcome either when things are happening or when someone has a new insight to offer on something that is already known. This isn't as simple as it sounds; can your company truly claim that many insights or scoops on a regular basis? If you are talking to regular customers who are expecting to buy again then they might be happy simply to hear about new stock coming in, a new offer and so forth.

Frequency is another issue. How often your customers will want to hear from you will depend on who you are and who they are; when the Guardian launched its Business Insight blog in 2005 it aimed for two or three entries per day. If your blog entry is going to consist of special offers and information on stock then a thrice-daily update will be overkill – in fact, a blog rather than an occasional e-mail will in itself be too much.

Assuming you have something to say then you need to bear in mind that consistency is everything – if people expect two entries a week, give them two entries a week. A blog whose entries are out of date looks like a failed experiment, and a company that's left it online looks like one that doesn't tidy up its loose ends.

3.2 Hazards

Clearly not all blogs are written by professional writers. Damned good job, say some of the readers; nevertheless this leaves two potential hazards open:

- Libel
- Unfettered commenting
- Corporate messaging and nothing else

3.2.1 Libel

The first is clear-cut: journalists who are published by professional organisations will have received professional training about what they may or may not say. Tell the world your rival MD is a creep and they can't touch you, for example, as it's a non-specific insult; tell them she's a dishonest creep and you'd better have proof. The untrained eye might not spot the difference as its owner types and uploads. In addition, the professional journalist – unless he or she has signed a particularly bad contract – will be indemnified in cases where a libel is committed.



A blog whose entries are out of date looks like a failed experiment, and a company that's left it online looks like one that doesn't tidy up...



3.2.2 Comments

The flipside of this is that blogs attract comments. Anyone who has glanced through (say) the comments on the BBC radio presenters' blogs, however, will see that this can be a mixed blessing as people with axes to grind start to use the comments as a platform for their own dissatisfactions and in general start to abuse people. The commenters will almost certainly not be trained in media law – and their comments will be resident on the server of the person who owns the blog, who might be deemed liable.

An addendum to this is the spamming technology that can attach to blogs that allow comments. The vast majority of people will comment either sensibly or not, but genuinely; a spam-bot can attach thousands of come-ons for porn, adverts for gambling websites and other things that will at best subtract from a company's message and at worst damage an organisation's reputation. They can be managed but the time this will take needs to be built into any business plan that includes blogging.

3.2.3 Corporate messaging

Clearly, any blog that is well read will become part of your company's messaging and branding. However, anyone wanting pure messaging and branding can find it on your website and your brochures; if you have nothing further to add then it is almost certainly best not to build people's expectations up by offering a blog. Essentially if someone is offering something extra then the reader has the right to expect

something extra. To put it brutally, if all you have to offer is further corporate messaging in addition to that which you have already offered, your blog will be treated as a joke and abandoned by most of your target customers.

3.3 Blogs and press releases

Too many organisations simply put the latest press release on line and consider they have 'done' the blog. This is never, ever acceptable. There are a number of reasons that relate in particular to the IT industry and its readers:

3.3.1 Information overload

The typical IT industry reader will already subscribe to a large number of information sources. They'll read CNET, they'll read The Register and if your blog is the second or third source of the information they've found they'll most likely switch off and stop coming back.

3.3.2 Information already on your website

Ideally a good corporate website will have a section for company announcements, new product offers etc. – which your motivated buyers will already be watching. It is in nobody's interests that they should see the same information offered to them again only slightly repackaged – this gives the impression that you have little to say and can only recycle the same old stuff.

3.3.3 Possible answers

In order to add value to your organisation – and a blog needs to add value or there is no reason to have it – there are a number of subject areas that shouldn't clash with your existing output and which readers would welcome:

- Commentary on other reports and trends – is there a story on The Register about which you have strong feelings and to which you can add something? The blog is your most appropriate medium through which to do so.
- Identification of issues that affect the whole industry – perhaps there isn't a story on The Register or CNET about a subject you think needs covering. Maybe once you've raised it they'll pick your story up and run with it, exposing your blog and brand to thousands of new potential customers.

Remember, adding value rather than simply reissuing the contents of your press release section is vital if a blog is to succeed. And if you can somehow add something to an industry-wide issue or trend you can establish some sort of thought leadership.

4.0 External blogs

Whether or not you opt for a blog for your own company it is essential to be aware of the so-called 'Blogsphere', or 'bit of the Web that consists of blogs' in English. There can be a number of reasons for this.

4.1 Blogs about your company

Even if you don't have a blog for your business, you might find an influential and well-read blogger is writing about you. Whilst writing this white paper your author took five minutes to find blogs criticising computer manufacturer Dell (for launching its own blog!), Tesco and Barclays – I stopped searching at three and chose these companies completely at random.

The point is not that the companies involved should be policing and replying to items written about them – the larger the company the longer this would take and the less practical it would become, clearly. Rather the organisations involved need to be aware of what is being said, positive and negative, about them so they can respond to customers who raise issues they have seen raised in blogs when they arrive in person.

Equally, someone might have written positively about your organisation and you might be allowed to quote them on your own website.

4.1.2 Commenting on other people's blogs

If someone has allowed comments on their blog then clearly you're entitled to go ahead and comment. It's worth taking care, however, not to publish any overt advertisements on someone else's blog; these will rarely be well received and may rebound on you as the person who posted an unwanted comment in the first place.

4.2 Blogs about your industry

Whether or not you publish a blog it is worth finding out whether someone else publishes something in your industry. If it's a good one you might well get the gossip and information more quickly than your industry journal can physically deliver it.

5.0 Conclusions

Blogging is largely uncharted territory in marketing terms at the moment. It is certain that there are many blogs of varying value in numerous places around the Internet, and they're not all operated by geeks. Some discrimination is essential and should you decide to blog yourself then you need to be positive that you have something to say rather than joining the chaff.

The benefits are colossal and the technology simple and inexpensive. There is no better time to join in the blogging revolution – good luck!