

Jumping on the corporate blog wagon



BY JIM CARROLL

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As a digital marketing professional, you've always got one eye peering at the future, examining emerging trends and technologies that might provide you with new ways of reaching and dealing with your customers.

So let me ask you this: Have blogs made it on to your strategic radar?

If you don't even know what a "blog" (or Weblog) is, that's a problem, since it is one of the most significant online trends. There are hundreds of thousands of these "online journals," most of them maintained by individuals. They could be likened to an online personal diary in that many contain a regular series of postings from an individual about a topic, their life, or day-to-day events that impact them. A Weblog might contain short notes with links to other sites that contain relevant news or information, often with a bit of commentary.

While some blogs are quite public, particularly those that deal with political topics, news or technology issues, many are deeply personal. They're aimed at a small group of friends or family, and contain information that isn't exactly scintillating. I did a random search and came across one by a fellow named Steve Wolverton, which—among other postings—featured an entry that he had "washed the boat and the Jeep today." Not exactly earth-shattering stuff.

Even so, blogs are getting a lot of attention in the mainstream press. And,

once a trend gets established on the Net, the usual prognostications follow: Blogs are "revolutionary" and will "forever change journalism." They bring an "unprecedented level of publishing power to the people" and "change the information dynamics in society."

After a while, I think many of us automatically tune out anything that contains the word "revolutionary." Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss the blogging phenomenon, because I think we are witnessing the emergence of a significant new customer relationship tool.

Macromedia, the developer of Flash, Shockwave, Dreamweaver and other digital creative tools, recently established several Weblogs pertaining to its products. Staff members maintain a blog that features a running commentary with news, tips on bug fixes, hints, links to sites that have been built using the product, customer feedback and so on. There are blogs on ColdFusion (<http://vvmx.blogspot.com/>), Dreamweaver (<http://radio.weblogs.com/0106884/>) and Macromedia MX (<http://jdmx.blogspot.com/>). There's even Waldo's Weblog, which features postings from the Macromedia sales engineer for Benelux. Some Weblogs are official; others clearly "personal."

But in essence, all of them offer a smattering of information aimed at someone rather important—the customer. And the experience of Macrome-

dia points us clearly into the future: Customers like these blogs!

I believe that Macromedia's efforts are likely just the tip of the iceberg. Rumour has it that some folks at Harley-Davidson are playing around with blogging software. It likely won't be too long before we see an official Harley blog that features ongoing commentary, news and updates from an "evangelist" within the Harley organization. Featured within the main Harley-Davidson site, the effort will emerge as a powerful means by which the company can further cement its digital relationship with its customers. Harley has a new model coming out? It's reported directly to Harley fans through the blog. Someone is doing a cross-country bike ride on a Harley with the monies collected going to a charity? Write it into the blog. A new Harley ad is released? Link it in the blog, and viewers will follow.

Companies also need to realize that beyond their own corporate-sponsored blogs, they'll find that customers are using blogs to report on their products. This can have an impact on product positioning and perspectives. Take a look at BoingBoing.net, "A Directory of Wonderful Things" and Gizmodo.com, "the gadget Weblog," both of which report on new products. Being a gadget freak, I watch the latter on a regular basis, while I find the former fascinating for its coverage of a wide range of topics.

Will the information I find here influence me as a consumer? Definitely.

The bottom-line question is: Does the entire phenomenon of blogging have a consumer impact? Recently, thousands of Weblogs were abuzz with pointers to one of the new Apple "Switch" ads, with many people offering their opinions on their blogs that the young girl in the ad appears obviously whacked out on something. (Judge the ad for yourself at <http://www.apple.com/switch/ads/ellenfeiss.html>.) I'd hazard a guess that Apple saw the traffic for that ad spike dramatically.

What should marketers do? First and foremost, watch for signals in the corporate sector as to the emergence of Weblogging as a potent business tool. I think that within a year, this buzzword will have moved into the mainstream. Get it onto your own strategic radar. Second, begin to play around with Weblogs now. Get familiar with the tools and the software. Immerse yourself in the Weblog community in order to understand what is happening, and to get the technology and the culture.

While Weblogs aren't new, corporate blogs are, and it would behoove you to get involved now.

JIM CARROLL is an author and keynote speaker based in Toronto. He established Bureau-Blog.com a few months ago to reach a core group of his own "customers."