

Get the conversation started with blogs

Three blogging corollaries that you need to know

By Diane P. Burley

A recent *Alarm: Clock* article argued that firms, particularly startups, abandon outside PR agencies and opt instead to groom talent in-house. The author contended that outside agencies aren't particularly astute at picking up new communication tools such as blogging and podcasting and therefore aren't worth their retainers.

Don't gnash and gnarl over the thin premise of inside or outside PR counsel — that's merely a red herring. The overall thrust should be a point well-taken: Blogging literacy is as important today as learning how to put a release on the wire service. In fact, blogging may finally be the Holy Grail for more billable and quantifiable hours.

The sound of the word blog may be foreboding, but the etymology is actually "log," which most of us can handle. We log thoughts and hours. In the case of your clients, they prefer to see the results of the former — understanding that the latter will follow. A weblog is the full form of the word — with blog as the diminutive. For early adopters, blogs were a channel for dispensing one's thoughts. However, I prefer to think of blogs as mechanisms for people to converse about a subject.

Blog Corollary No. 1: A blog is not so much a medium as it is a tool.

Inexpensive blogging technology allows a blogger to set up a site with literally a few dozen keystrokes. Companies like Typepad offer a terrific hosted model that is free for the first 60 days — and a modest \$140 for a full year after that, which is less than the cost of one year's worth of paper and stamps.

Blogging technology is sneaky in how it works — it has a built-in syndication feed that you can turn on or off. For example, my kids' blog is private — only those who know the address can get to it. But my magazine's blog is very much public — when I push the save button, more than 60,000 sites are fed my headline. My story might only be there for a fleeting moment (as bloggers seem to have endless energy), still, from these updates, we do see traffic.

But forget about the technology. Like Dorothy, who could always get back to Kansas, PR practitioners already possess the skills necessary to be great bloggers. Blogging is about writing. By creating a blog, you are creating a point of view — and the germ for a conversation. The better the writing, the more people



you will have participating in your conversation. If right about now you're thinking "a blog sounds like a full-time job," you could be right.

The beautiful thing about blogging though, is that you can wade into it slowly. Start by posting comments on someone else's blog.

Blog Corollary No. 2: Bloggers like comments. Comment on a person's blog and you immediately pique their interest. It's like finding a friend.

My magazine's blog (we go back and forth on what we should call it: Blog, Weblog or News & Commentary) focuses on the high-end contemporary and modern design industries: kitchens, baths, furnishings and home theater. We talk about trends, materials, world-renowned designers and what's going on in the world of contemporary design. I know many of the manufacturers' publicists very well, and while they will often pitch their clients to me, they don't comment on the magazine's blog.

In some cases their pitch is perfect as a comment — and we will encourage them to post. They politely defer. So, what is really going on? Are they shy about their client's product? Nope, because they will let us post the comment for them. I can only surmise that they may be scared about the technology and don't want to appear foolish.

I understand that. So, here's a quick

someone has responded to your comment.

So, what do you write?

Blog Corollary No. 3: Write like it's a letter to the editor — civil discourse is always encouraged because this is, after all, a conversation — not "Crossfire."

If you are unsure, just start reading the blogs out there. A good place to find blogs of a feather is to do a search on your industry segment "+blogs." You will unearth a litany of blogs. It won't be long before you start to figure out the players in your industry. You'll be stunned at how much influence they have over others. Bloggers are beat journalists (and wannabe product marketers) who have their ears to the ground.

There's one more sneaky thing about blogs, and this may be the important point. Do a search on almost any subject, and you will find a blog listed on the first page. That's because the software was written to be a perfect complement to search engines. You don't have to worry about H1 tags and page titles and so on like you should (but probably don't) on your own corporate Web site. So blogs win in organic searches. Translation: You may have a better chance of having your message read on a blog than you do in traditional media.

If your clients aren't blogging, here's a chance to put together a plan where you will provide some of the content and editorial oversight. You, freelancers or staffers may be able to post — as long as it is in keeping with sanctioned editorial direction. Also consider revising the communication plan to include rules about blogging. Under what circumstances may staffers identify themselves with the company? (Remember, always act ethically.) Keeping too much control may stifle conversation, but you don't want a free-for-all either.

To get a conversation started, there's no better way than with a blog. **T**

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start on how to post a comment. At the bottom of a story there are a couple of links: "Trackback," "Permalink" and "Comment." Comment is the one you want. Click on it and it will probably ask you to register. Golden opportunity. You can use your client's name, a description of your client, your name or a description of your firm. You will also have the opportunity to put in your url so that, when your name appears, it will be directly linked to your site.

For advanced users, the Trackback feature allows you to be notified when

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