



## Some guidelines for corporate blogging

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### INTRODUCTION

Weblogs (or "blogs" for short) have been a feature of the World Wide Web for a number of years now, and they provide a useful means for individuals to post content easily and quickly to the Web, without necessarily knowing much (if anything) about the technicalities of how Web sites are built.

However, a successful blog does not come about 'naturally' – it is an ongoing responsibility which takes time, resources and effort to start and (more importantly) maintain. The following guidelines will help you decide whether a blog is an appropriate activity for your requirements, and gives some pointers towards how you can make it a success.

### THINGS TO DO

#### AT THE BEGINNING

Before you begin a blog, ask yourself questions such as the following:

- Why do we want to have a blog?
- What subject(s) will it cover?
- Who is the audience?
- Is there an audience?
- Do we have the resources, commitment, etc. to keep maintaining it regularly?

Find a theme for your blog, and as far as possible, stick to it. Some blogs can get away with being about nothing in particular, but your blog may find it easier to gain a regular audience if they have a reasonable idea what to expect when they visit.

#### RESOURCES

If you are thinking of starting a blog for your investment or organisation, you should be aware that a blog requires regular attention, and is a long-term commitment. One could paraphrase an old media

slogan ("a blog is not just for Christmas – it's for life"), or more prosaically, bear in mind Jeremiah Owyang's comment that "blogging's biggest cost isn't money, it's time"<sup>1</sup>.

Sufficient resources should therefore be allocated to ensure regular posts and updates to the blog. To put it bluntly, a blog will not run itself – bear in mind that each post will need considering, writing, proof-reading, etc., to keep the standard at the required level. Furthermore, if you wish to allow comments from readers, you will need to allocate additional resources to the moderation of comments, to ensure that entries which are for some reason unsuitable are 'caught' before they make their way to the live site (wherever possible).

### Technical considerations

You should also think about the technical aspect of how the blog is going to be maintained and hosted. Blogging solutions fall broadly into two categories:

- A service which runs on a remote server
- An application which runs on your server

To complicate things further, some solutions combine elements of both the above – for example, Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) is a 'remote' service which offers the option to use your own webserver space to host the blog, whilst Wordpress is available both as an application you can install on your webserver (<http://wordpress.org/>) and as a hosted and centrally-managed service (<http://wordpress.com/>).

In short, you have a few choices for hosting and maintaining your blog, each with their own pros and cons:

Option	Pros	Cons
<b>Use the webserver space provided by the blogging service (or other external solution)</b>	<p>Useful if you do not have suitable arrangements at your organisation</p> <p>More control over content</p> <p>May give you more technical features (e.g. database or scripting support) than your organisation's solution</p> <p>May not be subject to same restrictions as your organisation's arrangements</p>	<p>Your organisation may be unhappy with you using (or may not allow you to use) external hosting</p> <p>May have to pay extra for 'premium' service, to obtain sufficient server space, remove adverts, etc.</p> <p>If using blogging service's webserver space, domain name will probably be 'branded' with the name of the service (e.g. <a href="http://myblog.blogspot.com/">http://myblog.blogspot.com/</a>) unless you pay more</p>
<b>Use your organisation's webserver space, and install a 'local' copy of a blogging application (e.g. Wordpress)</b>	<p>More control over technical aspects of the blog (e.g. installing additional functionality, customising code, etc.)</p> <p>More control over what appears on your blog pages (e.g. no adverts, etc. unless you want them)</p>	<p>Your organisation's hosting solution may not support the application's technical requirements (e.g. Wordpress requires MySQL database and PHP support)</p> <p>You will have to keep the application and any add-ons updated for security reasons</p>

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah Owyang, 'The Many Challenges of Corporate Blogging' (<http://www.web-strategist.com/blog/2008/05/29/the-many-challenges-of-corporate-blogging/>)

**Use an external blogging service which provides the option to post to your own webspace (e.g. Blogger)**

Gives you control over the hosting, with the advantage of not having to maintain the blogging application yourself

(unless your technical staff can be prevailed upon to do so on your behalf)

You have to specify FTP login details in your settings for the blogging service you are using<sup>2</sup>

## COMMUNITY

A good proportion of blogs (certainly, many of the better ones) try to generate a sense of community – for instance, allowing comments from readers and (even better) making an effort to read and respond to them. Many blogs have a "blogroll" – basically, a list of links to other blogs and sites which may be of relevance and/or interest – on each page, so every blog owner should be keeping an eye out for other locations on the Web whose content shares something with their own.

A blog's comment facility can be its most useful feature from the engagement point of view, but as mentioned above, it is highly advisable to 'moderate' the comments posted. Whilst this requires additional staff time and resources, moderating comments can avoid embarrassment or other reputational risks, and is therefore very important, if not essential.

Furthermore, the leading blogging applications give you the choice as to whether you moderate comments 'proactively' (checking every comment before allowing it to be posted) or 'reactively' (removing 'unsuitable' comments after they have been posted). It is up to those responsible for the individual blog which of these routes you wish to take – 'pre-moderation' of comments may be 'safer', but it can also be more labour-intensive, can delay legitimate comments appearing on the site, and at worst can lead to accusations of censorship from your readers. The most draconian solution is of course to disable comments entirely, although this option removes much of the 'Web 2.0' benefits of having a blog in the first place, and should be considered with caution.

A blog is a useful channel for engaging with stakeholders directly; however, use this facility with caution when it comes to making a significant announcement via the blog. For numerous reasons – not least, of common courtesy – it is advisable to clear such announcements with relevant colleagues, so that they are prepared to respond to any resulting queries. Alternatively, it should perhaps be considered whether a blog is the most appropriate forum for the announcement (although it may be useful for follow-up – say, for further explanation of the thinking behind the announcement, or to invite comments from the audience).

Don't forget that blogs by their nature are two-way, even if commenting is disabled. If the blog is reaching and engaging an audience, feedback has a way of reaching the writer, one way or another. Ask yourself whether the writer will be able and willing to spend time responding to feedback on their posts.

## SUCCESS AND IMPACT

Consider how the blog's 'success' and/or 'impact' is to be evaluated. You should be able to obtain usage statistics on your blog from wherever it is hosted – this may be your Internet service provider's Web space, or if your blog is connected with your higher education institution, their servers – and these stats will help you gauge how much attention your pages are receiving (though you should familiarise yourself with the difference between 'hits', 'page views' and 'visits').

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<sup>2</sup> If this is a matter of concern for you, one option may be to check with your technical staff whether it is possible to set up a separate FTP login just for the blog, so that only necessary access is granted.

Don't rely solely on your page statistics to judge your blog's success, though – there are other metrics you should bear in mind as well. For instance, most blogging services provide blog posts as RSS feeds, and some of these feeds include the entire blog post in each entry (whereas previously only a headline and summary might be provided). If your blog feed does this, then some visitors may subscribe to your blog using an RSS feed reader or online RSS service (e.g. Google Reader or Bloglines), and may therefore potentially read your blog posts (or not) without ever actually visiting your actual blog site. This may not bother you (they may be reading either way), but if it does, you should check whether your blog service allows you to limit RSS feed items to titles and summaries only<sup>3</sup>.

## WRITING FOR A BLOG

You should adopt the appropriate 'tone' in the writing of blog posts – decide from the beginning what 'level' the blog is aiming for, and write to it. Blogs are frequently intended to be more intimate and 'human', but posts should strike a balance between "corporate flannel" and "too informal", wherever possible. You should also ensure that any ESRC-related blog complies with the ESRC corporate identity guidelines – ask the Communications team at Polaris House if you are not sure about what this entails, or you can find the identity guidelines on ESRC Society Today<sup>4</sup>.

Everyone who will post to the blog, needs to be aware that they are doing so on behalf of their organisation, and should take care to write responsibly. Much of this involves simple common sense – a good rule of thumb is to assume that everyone can (or could) read anything you post, even if the blog is an internal one. (Someone could always 'leak' an internal post to the outside world, and if your organisation is covered by the Freedom of Information Act, the blog is most likely subject to the Act in the same way as other internal communications, such as memos and e-mails. If in doubt on this point, check with your organisation's Fol officer.)

If your organisation has the resources, one possibility which has been suggested, is to assign a "blogging buddy" to each corporate blogger, who will read each poster's writing before it goes live<sup>5</sup>.

Another useful tip is, again, possibly obvious: to borrow a phrase<sup>6</sup>, *write what you know*. One reason is that hopefully your writing will probably turn out more interesting if you have an interest in the subject, as with any luck your enthusiasm for the topic will come through in your post. If you have to stray into unfamiliar territory, at least do your research first, particularly if your likely audience will be as familiar with the subject matter – if not more so – than you are. Should you make errors, there may be readers who are more than willing to set you straight!

To return to the earlier 'pet' analogy, remember that a blog demands commitment from those who administer it. It must not be assumed that someone else is going to run the blog on your behalf, should it prove too difficult to keep up with regular updates. This ultimately comes back to the earlier point regarding resources: before you even launch a blog, try and ascertain whether you (and/or your colleagues) have the resources to keep it going.

## SUMMARY

### DO...

- Decide the "5 W's (and 1 H)" (who, what, when, where, why and how) of your blog, before you start it
- Allocate sufficient resources to start your blog and keep it going

<sup>3</sup> Blogger offers this facility (Settings > Site Feed > Allow Blog Feeds – you can choose "Full", "Short" or "None"). Wordpress does not appear to do so, either 'natively' or via a plugin – however, this may be rectified in future versions.

<sup>4</sup> Identity Guidelines: [http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Support/Identity\\_Guidelines/](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Support/Identity_Guidelines/)

<sup>5</sup> Suggested by author Nicholas Carr in 'Seven rules for corporate blogging' ([http://www.roughtrade.com/archives/2006/03/seven\\_rules\\_for.php](http://www.roughtrade.com/archives/2006/03/seven_rules_for.php)) – note also the first rule he proposes!

<sup>6</sup> From Sun Microsystems' "Guidelines on Public Discourse" (<http://www.sun.com/communities/guidelines.jsp>) – the company's guidelines for its corporate blogging activities.

- Write engagingly, responsibly and often
- Write about what you know about (or at least do your research)
- Engage with your audience where possible
- Adhere to ESRC corporate identity guidelines
- Be respectful
- Think about the quality of your work – e.g. use a spell-checker
- Think about the consequences of your work – e.g. could what you've written cause embarrassment or other difficulties for your employer (or yourself)?

**DON'T...**

- Write abusive, slanderous, illegal or other inappropriate content
- Make 'unilateral' important announcements on the blog without clearing it with appropriate colleagues
- Write about 'secret' corporate topics, confidential material, or anything else which may be legally protected (e.g. Data Protection Act)
- Start a blog, and then abandon it to others if you find you lack the resources to maintain it!