Blogs – Why Marketers Need Them

By Jon Gericke

Wikipedia, the on-line encyclopaedia, defines a blog as “a user-generated website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order.” Blog started off as a way for sad lonely people to write to the world about what they are going through.

Jane Doe would write her on-line diary and some people would log on a read it for the strange reason people read diaries. Since then, blogs have moved on, there is the famous account of the bombing of Baghdad as written by a resident in the Iraqi capital. Newspapers are debating the future of the printed news as they go on-line and supply fast news as it happens. Bloggers stopped being diary writers and became a news source. Citizens became journalists and brought independent thinking to readers.

But what does all of this have to do with marketers and companies around the world? People read blogs and people trust blogs. If someone is telling you their deepest, darkest secrets and you log on to their site every day to see what their latest move is, then you bond with that person. The techno geeks call it Web 2.0; Social Networking. If that same person says that they have found a fantastic new product, then who am I to say that it isn’t? The top South African blog gets an average of 4750 unique hits a week. That’s more than 4000 different people every week. Not huge when you compare it to the average newspaper but huge when compared to your diary at home.

The site, Chump-Style, does nothing special. It puts up pictures of semi-naked women, posts a joke or two but will also champion a cause. Switch your lights on for peace, write a letter to Eskom to complain about the electricity or complain to a cell phone operator about poor service. The danger here is not so much in the 4000 individuals that read the site but the people that are creating links to it.

Those sites then have links to them and so on into the great void that is the internet. Remember too that information in the internet hardly ever goes away. Someone is archiving it, saving it or copying it somewhere.

But it’s not all doom and gloom. A blog can be used for good. A few ingenious people are using blogs to promote their products. Much the same as a product placement on a television advert, a product placement in a blog could do the same thing. If a blogger raves about your product and it gets a few links and those links get linked, who knows how many people will see the positive reviews. The opposite is true too, so make sure people say good things. Be warned, the online world and the people who frequent it are a clever bunch and they communicate. Some companies have been caught out with fake blogs. Like the movie house a few years ago that was caught out for creating fake, positive reviews for their posters. Coca Cola has recently been in trouble for creating a fake blog. It was a “diary” of a coke lover, someone who raved about all of the flavours and how it made him happy. It worked, for a while, but then they were caught and had to backtrack.

So how does one use a blog?

The easiest way is for people to get an insight into your company. Let staff blog, let them share their experiences with the world. Launch a new product with a teaser blog. “The Blaire Witch Project” did this with great effect and created a huge following before the movie was released, the same for “Snakes on a Plane”. In fact, Snakes added whole scenes to the movie that were suggested via their blog.

Another thing to remember is that a blog is a two-way conversation. You can get immediate feedback of what you have posted. As more and more people get on-line in South Africa, this will increase and you can get immediate consumer feedback without it costing a fortune.

That brings me to another point: a blog is free. You can set a blog up in minutes and start telling people what you want them to read. The internet is becoming a blog. Search for anything on the internet these days and there will be at least four blogs on the first page of sites you find. Take advantage of a booming trade and get your news out there, otherwise someone else will.

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