

BLOGGING FOR BUSINESS MADE EASY

An iRepNetwork Business Guide

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There was a time when many of us used to keep diaries, logs or journals, lugging around that ugly black book wherever we went. It was an efficient way of keeping track of things. Today, the Web has taken the place of that book, in the form of a blog.

So What Is A Blog?

A blog, or web-log as it was once called, is today's version of the diary. But it is more sophisticated than that. It is a user-generated website that collects your entries (*known as posts*) in reverse chronological order, always listing the most recent post first. Readers are also allowed to comment and give their opinions of any posts via a simple form on a blog.

But the real beauty of blogs lies in its simplicity. It negates the tedious process of learning HTML, Web design or coding, otherwise needed to operate a functional website. You can update a blog via any Internet connection, even updating it using a cell phone.

Setting up a blog can take as little as five minutes (*and that's if you're unsure of what you're doing*) and you are ready to publish your content. It is that easy. If you can send an e-mail, you are more than ready to start blogging.

How Are Blogs Applicable To Businesses?

The ease in publishing a blog makes it a perfect marketing vehicle for any type of business. Whether you work from home or are the CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation, blogs will make an ideal addition to your marketing strategy.

Blogs create a face to your business that your customers can identify with and participate in. They have become a valuable part of today's consumer-generated media, giving consumers a platform to engage in actively and to dialog with key personnel within a company.

Companies like General Motors, IBM, Boeing, and Microsoft have set up blogs to market their services or products because it is such a cost-effective way of communicating quickly with their prospects and customers. By providing a blog for their customers to talk about their products, a company can easily find out what their customers really want and tailor their products accordingly. The open-dialog between company and customer has dramatically cut costs and boosted revenue because companies are getting first-hand research information for next-to-nothing! It is the perfect instant feedback mechanism.

If you are running a business from home, the same strategies apply. Use blogs to:

- Provide value-added content
- Build a relationship with your readers
- Establish trust with your customers while gaining credibility
- Create awareness about your product offerings
- Test ideas and research your market by getting your readers and customers to participate in discussions

Sounds Good, How Do I Get Started?

It is best to get started by identifying and choosing the right tools to get the job done efficiently. This means choosing the right blog platform for your needs. Blog platforms are offered as two options: hosted and stand-alone.

The hosted option eliminates the hassle of finding a host for your blog as the company takes care of that for you. TypePad.com is one such company that offers this.

The stand-alone option allows you to obtain a license for the blogging software, which gives you the right to host it with a hosting company of your choice. MoveableType.org is an example of this. Stand-alone platforms allow greater flexibility for user customization, especially those who are comfortable tinkering with the code. This option is for those who want ultimate control of their blog platforms.

Because you're probably just getting started with blogging, we suggest you turn your attention to just two choices – Blogger.com and WordPress.org. Blogger is a hosted blog which is owned by Google. Blogger is very popular with those just starting out with blogging because the platform, hosting and domain-names are free.

WordPress.org is a free stand-alone option. If you are already hosting some of your websites with a web host, WordPress is ideal for you. Not only is WordPress free for unlimited use, but it is the best-supported blog platform there is. For ultimate control of your blog, this is as good as it gets. It is the blog platform of choice of today's savviest bloggers.

The WordPress platform is also offered as a hosted option through WordPress.com. Like Blogger, WordPress.com offers the platform, hosting and domain names for free. But it is not for commercial use and is limited in other ways.

The choice of blog platform is left entirely up to you, but you definitely cannot go wrong with either Blogger.com or WordPress.org to get you off the ground and running.

Visit the sites mentioned and if you're going for the hosted option, simply sign-up for an account and you'll be ready to start blogging immediately. With the stand-alone option, visit WordPress.org and download the software to your server. Many hosting companies also offer one-click installation of WordPress through your control panel. There is excellent communal support with WordPress so, if you get stuck at any point during the installation process, just check into the forum and your answer will probably be found there.

Choosing A Name For Your Blog

If you already own a website, you understand the significance of choosing a good domain-name. A good domain-name not only enhances the branding of your business, but it also helps in higher search engine rankings. Depending on how you are planning to use your blog, consider if you should choose a domain-name which is keyword-based or brandable. An example of a brandable domain-name is Google.com. Nothing keyword-rich about it, but it is definitely etched in the minds of every Web surfer.

If your blog is going to play a significant role in your business, then spend some time choosing the right domain-name for it. People tend to remember memorable domain-names that end with a dot com so try to stick with those. You may consider using a free tool such as, DomainsBot.com to help in registering a good name. Then choose a stand-alone blog platform like WordPress.org for a better chance of attracting visitors to your blog on a regular basis.

Choosing A Template For Your Blog

With hosted options like Blogger, the need for web design is eliminated. These hosted options already have blog templates ready for use. Just pick a design that works well with the theme of your business and get ready to start blogging. The downside to this is that there is only so much you can do to alter its look and feel. What you see is what you get.

Templates are also freely given away by the WordPress community with no strings attached. You have full rights to grab any of these templates and alter them to suit the theme of your business blog. There are also templates available for sale and you're free to hire a Web Designer to design the style of your blog from the ground up. There are no limitations to what you can do with your design.

You can find hundreds of templates at WordPress.org/extend/themes or search Google for "WordPress templates" and you'll get a variety of sites to choose from.

Publishing Your Content

After setting up your business blog, it now comes down to the most important reason of having a blog in the first place - getting your content out to the world.

For some, this is an easy process. For many others however, publishing useful and unique content regularly can be severely daunting. Distinguishing yourself from other business bloggers takes a bit of understanding of who your core readers are. Put some time aside to research your audience and find out what they would like to read about. Here are some considerations to bear in mind when publishing your content:

- Should I make my posts educational, newsworthy, informational, entertaining and debatable or, a combination of all those?
- How long should my posts be? (*This is where getting feedback from your readers comes in.*)
- Should I consider a blog partnership (*getting guest bloggers to write unique content for your blog*)?

The initial excitement of publishing a blog can quickly dissipate when your “content well” starts to dry up. So where do you turn to for ideas and inspiration to get readers queuing up to read your work? Well, let’s start with how you can categorize your content in a way that could potentially skyrocket your readership:

- The infamous “Top 10” lists
- How-To information
- Reviews
- Interview someone within your business niche
- Latest trends and newsworthy information
- Present relevant business case-studies
- Recommend other business blogs that might be of interest to your readers

But all the above may be rendered useless if you can’t get to a source for inspiration. So here are some of the best places to visit when you need to get those creative juices flowing:

- News sites – CNN, Yahoo News, Google News are just some of many News websites available to spark an interesting idea for a blog post. Dig into News stories and press releases to see what is significant for your blog. Cast your opinion on it and you’ve just got yourself a new post. But don’t stop there.

Look for News sites that are specific to your industry as well. For example, if you’re blogging about finance, head on over to Bloomberg Financial News

and get ideas from there. About.com is another site that covers a gamut of topics that makes for such a great source for content ideas.

- Online Groups / Social Networking sites / Forums – Google Groups, Yahoo Groups and MySpace are a hotbed of ideas. Your potential readers and customers could be lurking within these groups, freely exchanging the kind of information a market research company would pay thousands of dollars for.

Don't ignore forums that are relevant to your industry. Like social networking sites and online groups, forums attract the kind of audience that could be interested in the information you are offering.

- Social Bookmarking Services – Like social networking sites, social bookmarking services are all the rage today. These services allow users to rate and recommend topics that are popular with them. They are a portal into the hottest and latest trends as deemed by public opinion.

Visit sites such as Technorati.com, Del.icio.us, StumbleUpon.com, Reddit.com and Digg.com to get blogging ideas. While there are a great number of other social bookmarking sites springing up onto the Web quite regularly, those are the most referred to by professional bloggers for research.

- High Traffic Sites_– Another fantastic source of blogging ideas can be found at high traffic sites such as Alexa.com, Amazon.com, Ebay.com, Craigslist.org and Wikipedia.org. A wealth of ideas can be mined just from sifting through these sites' categories.
- Article Directories_– Article directories offer you the option of re-printing the articles of your choice on your blog. This can come in handy if you're having an off day but need something to whet the appetite of your readers.

Some of the more popular directories are EzineArticles.com, GoArticles.com and ArticleCity.com. These articles are free to re-print but, read the terms on these sites on how to go about re-printing them.

- Some Other Sources_– Another idea-generating method is to look out for what people are searching for and decide if you could blog about these search terms. Visit popular sites like Yahoo Buzz, Google Zeitgeist and MetaCrawler.com for this purpose.

Try searching for ideas using blog search engines as well. The best site to do this is at Technorati.com. Google and Yahoo have blog search engines that might pull different search results from Technorati.com, so try alternating to get what you're looking for.

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Now That I've Got Content, How Do I Get Readers?

Probably the trickiest part for any online business owner is getting targeted visitors to their sites. This is more science than art and has spawned an industry all of its own. Search engine optimization or SEO as it's more affectionately referred to, is a major player in how you get targeted visitors to your sites or in this case, your blogs. There are other promotional and marketing strategies that you can employ, but it all starts with optimizing your blogs for SEO. If you want your blog to be found, you have to optimize it for the search engines.

But here's the good news. Search engines like Google love blogs. That means blogs tend to be indexed faster than websites and may stand a better chance of ranking well in Google or in any other search engine. This is because blogs offer fresh content regularly, which is what search engines want.

How much optimization you can perform on your blog depends once again on whether you're using a hosted blog platform like Blogger or a stand-alone like WordPress.org.

A stand-alone platform like WordPress is the best way to go for SEO purposes. There are no limits as to how you can customize your WordPress blog. But because most beginners tend to use the hosted option, we'll explore SEO tactics that everyone can benefit from.

Split Your Blog's Search Engine Optimization Into Offsite And Onsite SEO

Offsite SEO can be summed up as just this – inbound links. This means blogs other than your own, are linking to your blogs. Inbound links are quite possibly the most important SEO tactic that could get your blogs highly ranked in the search engines.

So how do you get others to link to you? Here are some ways to get you started:

- Write Quality Content – Nothing gets you links faster than writing content that affects your readers. If a little bit of controversy helps, throw that in. As word gets around about your posts, bloggers will inevitably link to you.
- Post Comments On Blogs You Read – Don't hesitate to post worthwhile comments on other blogs, be it your competitors or not. You may get a follow-up with a link pointing to your blog. And if that happens to be from a competitor with a huge audience, you'll be looking at some major traffic influx to your blog.

- **Submit Your Blog To Directories_**– You can submit your blogs to blog directories to generate more inbound links. Apart from buying links, this is something many bloggers do to get more traffic. Technorati.com is one of the most popular blog directories right now, but you can perform a Web search to find more.

Onsite SEO requires customization within your blog itself. Here's how to get started:

- **Optimize Your Content With Targeted Keywords_**– This topic really requires intense study, as it one of the more important subjects when discussing SEO. But in a nutshell, your blog posts should contain the keywords or keyword phrases that your potential customers or readers would most likely type into the search engines to find what they are looking for.

This requires advanced research of keywords on your part so that you can place these targeted keywords within your blog content. The result would be a highly optimized blog for the very information your potential customers are looking for.

This works especially well if your blog specializes on a certain subject, for instance, dog training. If your blog then branches out into cat training, training your parrot to talk, etc., the chances of losing your status as an authority site with the search engines will be high. So, keep each blog specialized.

Have your posts focused on one specific topic as well, so that you can moderate the keywords going into your content. Over-stuffing keywords can make for terrible reading which defeats the purpose of finding and keeping your customers.

Make your posts as original as possible and update your blog frequently, at least three times a week.

- **Place Your Keywords Here Too** – Within the URL of the page, page and post titles, heading tags such as H1, image alt tags and meta tags. Bold your keywords where you can too.
- **Create A Good Linking Structure Within Your Blog** – Create links that link from a certain post in your blog to another relevant post which you had written previously. This interlinking makes it very easy for search engines to re-index your blog, allowing for more of your pages to be indexed. Categorize your information and place them on your blog's sidebar. Create a sitemap once your blog starts growing larger in size.

- Ping Your Posts – Pinging is a way of notifying the search engines that you’ve just posted something on your blog. It is an invitation to the search engines to visit your blog. Most of the blog platforms automatically do this for you, but just in case, you can visit Pingomatic.com to get the job done. And it’s free.

What’s The Deal With RSS?

Work on the above SEO tactics for your blog and you will be well on your way towards a healthy search engine ranking. Meaning, be prepared for traffic to your blog.

Another very important benefit to publishing a blog, is something called “Real Simple Syndication” or RSS for short. RSS is a content delivery channel, distributing your content to your audience wherever they may be. Blogs use RSS to automatically deliver your content to your readers without them having to visit your site everyday to check whether your blog had been updated recently.

To accomplish this, your audience needs to subscribe to your blog’s feed. Using an RSS Feed Reader, they can now read your latest posts from the reader itself. It works like a simple subscription form. You place your feed icons in a prominent place on your blog where your readers simply click on it and get subscribed. You must have seen these icons. They look something like this:



RSS Feed Readers are available as desktop downloads or as Web-based applications. Many are freely available like Bloglines.com and Google Reader. Both of which are Web-based. Newsgator.com offers a desktop version but that doesn’t come free.

Using RSS is a much better way of syndicating your content than e-mail because RSS goes beyond just e-zines. And if you were wondering how managing your blog’s subscribers could be possible, there’s Feedburner.com to answer your question. Probably the best in the business, Feedburner provides the most detailed stats about your blog subscribers, giving you the edge to improve your blog’s performance as you see fit.

Promoting Your Blog To Find Even More Readers

If you’ve read this far, you’re already armed with enough knowledge to publish well-optimized business blogs. But there can never be enough readers for your blog. This is where some promotional strategies can come into play. Let’s run through some of them:

- Use Trackbacks - We mentioned commenting on other blogs previously, but trackbacks are another useful feature found on most blog platforms. If you were writing about someone else's blog, you should perform a trackback.

Trackbacks deposit your content onto that particular person's blog you just wrote about. Sounds complicated but this is a great way of getting another person's audience to pay attention to what you have to say.

- Post To Article Directories – You know about submitting your blogs to blog directories. But why not submit your content as articles to article directories? You will be reaching out to a significant amount of targeted readers this way. An e-zine publisher could easily use your articles as content for his audience and that could mean lots more eyeballs for your blog.
- Use Offline Promotional Methods – Get your blog's URL printed on your business brochures, flyers, business cards, letter heads, envelopes, ads or anywhere else you advertise offline. This is a great potential stream of new targeted readers. You may consider advertising online too.
- Add Your Blog's URL To Outgoing E-mail – An often overlooked strategy but very effective. You never know, your recipient might be a potential customer.
- Promote Using Web 2.0 Methods – Participate in social networking sites, online groups and forums to let them know about your business blog. Because they share the same interest, they are bound to pay your blog a visit.

Make use of social bookmarking services to spread the word about your blog. You can do this by placing icons offered by these bookmarking services on your blog. Anytime your readers find something worthy of being spread around, they would click this icon. It works like the "Tell-A-Friend" script previously used by many websites, but the reach is far greater with these bookmarking services.

Can I Monetize My Blogs?

Absolutely. Once you've got a good stream of traffic coming in, monetizing your blogs is a cinch. Today's most popular method of monetizing blogs is allowing advertisements on it. And the company offering the world's largest online contextual advertising program is Google. This program is known as AdSense.

By signing-up with AdSense, you are allowing Google to place targeted ads on your blog that are relevant to the theme of your blog. If a reader sees an ad and clicks on it out of interest, you earn yourself some money. The more readers that click on the ads, the more money you make. There are people making a full-time

income doing nothing but creating sites for AdSense. This may not necessarily be the best way to monetize your blog, but it is one of the easiest.

There are many more types of advertising programs like CPC advertising, Impression-Based Ads, Text Ads, etc. Take some time to study which advertising model works best for your blog.

The other way of monetizing your blog is to place affiliate links throughout your content. Amazon.com and Clickbank.com are examples of a companies that offers an affiliate program. Signing-up for it is free as with most companies offering such programs. Promoting affiliate products involves specially coded text-links that you can weave into your content or placing coded banners on your site. When a reader clicks on that link or banner and buys the product, you earn a commission.

Here are some other ideas you could implement towards monetizing your blog:

- Seeking sponsorship
- Donations or tip jars
- Selling merchandise
- Selling content via a subscription-based model
- Selling downloadable products

Ultimately, the key to making your business blog an overwhelming success is to keep it real and have fun with it. Make it a point to interact with everyone of your subscribers. The truth about publishing a blog is that it does not belong to you. It belongs to the community. Use this to your advantage to tap into the minds of your readers. If you're planning a new product, ask them for some of the features they would like to see in it. The blog makes it a perfect feedback mechanism to get the answers you need to make your business an ongoing success.