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Blogs, Vlogs, and Viral Marketing

by Teresa Todd

Will it blog? That is the question many companies face when evaluating how to effectively connect with consumers and ramp up their online presence. Blogs (text web logs) or their evolved cousin vlogs (video logs) and other new media entries are certainly trendy but are they always the right strategy?

The simple answer is that it depends. It depends on whether it's a good fit for a business' product or service and whether or not there is a commitment of labor to invest in keeping it going and creating value. As with every other marketing strategy, it is something that must fit with the company's culture and brand vision.

The mere existence of the Internet automatically means a company has an online presence through forum discussions, consumer Web sites and blogs, according to Kerri Erb, public relations professional. Most companies fear the talk-back aspect of social media but Erb points out that company blogs can give a business a means of establishing a voice online, allowing for a more approachable, conversational tone.

Blogs can also be an inexpensive form of advertising as many local media outlets offer no-cost blog hosting for local residents and business. Locally, The Signal newspaper offers users space on their online news site.

It's important to connect to the conversation, but what if new media doesn't fit with your company's culture or brand vision? Brad Chase, a former classmate and fellow colleague, urges companies to carefully consider the ramifications of jumping into social media, such as blogs, My Space, Facebook, Twitter or any other novel offering.

"Just because social media is out there for the taking (and it's generally cheap to implement), it doesn't mean you need to take it," cautions Chase. "A boring page about a boring product or company is worse than nothing at all. The only result is scorn, vitriol, laughter and maybe even worse — zero return on investment."

What if someone else is blogging or commenting about your company or brand? The reality is that anyone with a keyboard and an opinion can seek advice or sound off.

It's well documented that the best way for bloggers to increase web traffic is to let users have control. The "Mullet" strategy, just like the infamous 1980s hairstyle by the same name, denotes a blog with a professional, business up-front look and a party in the back. This approach is common among news information blogs, such as the-signal.com, where users are invited to argue, vent and comment on the secondary pages, while the site's editor keeps the front page looking sharp.

With an almost endless supply of consumer-generated content circulating for all to see, businesses need to take note of what's happening outside of their own efforts. While there's little a company can do to prevent

someone from writing a negative comment about their brand or posting a YouTube video to air grievances, monitoring online chatter has become an essential and important practice area for marketers and public relations professionals.

The Rise of Vlogs

The popularity of visual media, whether posted on a company's Web site or sites such as YouTube or FrictionTV, offers a wide range of new opportunities for strategic-thinking marketers. Similar in concept to text blogging, video blogs generally feature a consistent format with only the content changing with each new posting.

While text blogging requires a viewer to read and scroll, video blogs give the user freedom to watch, listen or do both simultaneously. Vlogging is more likely to be passed around in a word-of-mouth way than text blogs, giving it a clear advantage for potential outreach.

Product demonstrations are a natural for video blogs. Industrial strength blenders gained worldwide attention when Blendtec launched their now famous "Will It Blend?" viral marketing campaign. Short clips of Blendtec's Total Blender annihilating everything from a can of pork and beans to iPods and remote controls, created the type of buzz public relations practitioners dream about.

More than just entertaining, the videos directly attributed to heavy Web traffic and blender sales. Between YouTube viewings and the Will it Blend website, the campaign surpassed 100 million hits since launch slightly over one year ago.

The New Frontier: Googling Moms

So who's looking for products and services online? Certainly there are more consumers using Internet searches to find businesses than are those still thumbing through the phone directory. The majority of consumer communication is now happening online.

A key demographic leads the use of the online search field: the Googling Mom. Not sure who first coined the term, but it's a reference that continues to emerge in board room discussions. Mothers are known to be problem solvers – both online and offline. Search engines are a primary tool for seeking out answers. According to a 2007 media usage survey conducted by Ketchum and the University of Southern California, women tended to use search engines slightly more than men, 69 percent to 66 percent.

It's important that business executives reevaluate their online presence. It is estimated that having a Web presence is now only 1 percent about showcasing a company's wares and the remaining 99 percent about fulfilling the needs of their target constituents. That reality necessitates that content must be both relevant and conversational.

Ketchum's Gur Tsabar opines that companies who successfully provide answers to Googling moms at their most critical moment of search are much more likely to engender a lifetime of loyalty. The key is that the next time a Googling mom or anyone searches for answers online, a company's brand should position as a frontrunner in the search results. From there, the click-thru Web site needs to be a well-equipped resource filled with content relevant to the searchers' concerns.

Finishing First in Internet Searches

Optimizing press releases and Web site content helps elevate a company's position in Internet searches. The key is knowing the terms your customers use to search for products and services, as well as where they go for information.

First, research keyword terms and edit releases to include two or three target terms in the headline and first one hundred words. Instead of using a company's main URL, consider adding hotlinks to landing pages in press releases to help track where leads are coming from. If it's important to capture a visitor's personal information, consider hosting videos or offer download content behind a registration page.

Once your release is good-to-go, use one of the top press release distribution services that are crawled by Yahoo and Google News. According to Hitwise, an online competitive intelligence service, Google accounted for 68 percent of U.S.-based searches in April 2008 followed by Yahoo! Search, MSN and Ask.com at 20, 6 and 4 percent respectively. The combined total for the remaining 45 search engines monitored by Hitwise accounted for only 1.4 percent.

And most important, measure results. In addition to generating high keyword rankings in search engines, an optimized press release can also garner publicity in news media and blogs, stimulate website traffic, provide qualified leads, and increase online sales.

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