

By **MARTIN LINDSTROM** author of BRAND sense

You can't avoid blogs (or can you?)

They're so plentiful, and often so well-informed, the opinions they offer help form mainstream news reports. Given their potency, should blogging be adopted by brands as a communication tool?

The blogs and brands partnership has begun. Personality brands, such as Seth Godin (<http://sethgodin.typepad.com/>), Tom Peters (<http://www.tompeters.com/>) have them, and even the head of General Motors, Bob Lutz, has his own blog. Brands like Weight Watchers, LEGO, Apple, TiVo, and Harley-Davidson not only feature regularly in blogs, they have their own dedicated blogs created not as you might suspect by their brand-builders, but by their fans.

Control over brand messages is gradually being eroded from brand-builders and is increasingly skewed towards consumers. Should brands be looking into publishing their own blogs in order to represent their perspective and personality? Imagine Disney blogging about its characters, Nokia about its latest products, or Microsoft about virus control issues. This could help brands get

closer to their consumers by reaching out to core fan communities. Exploiting this avenue requires commitment. One problem for companies is writing regular and *useful* blog posts. To do so, they must be flexible and react promptly. Companies simply aren't armed with the flexibility nor can they manage the speedy response time necessary to run a relevant, interactive, and engaging blog. They'd rather produce a one-page press release rather than engage in interactive, topical points of view.

In the future, brands will have to take quick action effectively. They'll need to air their opinions fearlessly and share them with the world, all the while avoiding litigation and remaining unhampered by risk. Yet companies tend to shy away from political issues. They feel obliged to be inoffensive in every quarter. As a result their viewpoints are sanitized to the point of meaninglessness. By adopting this non-confrontational approach they are unable to sustain or inject value into a blog. Tomorrow's brands must overcome these inhibitions. In many ways, blogs present

the ultimate test for brands, since they reflect organizations' confidence and coherence. It would demonstrate brand self-esteem and ownership that speaks for itself unhesitatingly, promotes opinions, and shares them in hours rather than in weeks or months. As manufacturers and retailers learned just-in-time thinking in the '90s, brands will have to adopt a just-in-time ability to share information with consumers.

If brands don't make this evolutionary leap soon, companies will be left behind. Consumers expect timely e-mail responses and prompt order fulfillment. Brands need a holistic selling proposition (HSP) to deal with every aspect of consumers' requirements and to become part of the individual's minute-by-minute experience of everyday life.

Companies are far from achieving this. An organization that enables true HSP branding - brands that can handle the blog challenge - requires dramatic structural, systemic, and communications changes. This is what I recommend. Tackle blogs with 100 per cent commitment, or not at all. To build the necessary

infrastructure and enact structural, systemic, and communication changes, you must take on blogs as a communication vehicle wholeheartedly.

A lackadaisical effort will immediately be apparent to your audience. Blogs are about authenticity and honesty. You can't convince by imitating an opinion, aping behavior, or adopting a style too far removed from your company's personality.



If, however, you manage to set up the supporting infrastructure and regularly publish an authentic blog, you may open a gold mine of respect among customers and observers. However be aware of the risks - many people have already lost their jobs as a consequence of crossing the fine line of sharing opinions online. This phenomenon even has a name - to be douched/ The term first appeared when Delta Airlines crewmember, Ellen Simonetti, was asked to leave the company after sharing her view on life in her personal blog, which happened to include images of her wearing a Delta uniform.

These guidelines can help you make it happen:

Blogs are fast. Often, you have little time to get the best blogs out. There's a limit to the number and type of challenges you can predict and prepare for. Blogs promote discussion. Debate can ignite wildfires of both positive and negative responses. That's the beauty of blogs. They're impossible to predict, even more difficult to prepare for. Try to set a few guidelines in order to help you prepare as much as possible.

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First, identify and appoint a blogging agent, and define their authority. Give them as much editorial freedom as you can. Arm your blogger with criteria regarding which topics can and cannot be discussed. Give them the authority to conduct a dialogue. Be aware that the nature of blogs embraces provocation, so at some stage you might find yourself dealing with some interesting conflicts. If you're not prepared to run the gauntlet of risk, leave blogging alone. A good example of this is the Tinbasher blog. The blog is written by the owner of a small sheet-metal company in England. He tends to appeal to the ordinary consumer, and as a result has so far managed to penetrate markets he could not hope to have reached before his blog.

Blogs are about opinions.

Strong opinions tend to catch the public's attention. Politically correct, bland messages fade into the background. If you want to generate attention and earn respect among your customers and the media, go right to the edge of your comfort zone. Don't play a

safe game. If you can't balance on that edge, stick with press releases and leave blogging alone.

Jupitermedia CEO, Alan Meckler has no fear about talking up the foresight of his company, while at the same time naming those who have not risen to the challenges of interactive marketing and search. On July 13, while announcing the launch of a new blog, he says "Think of all the traditional print media companies that missed the boat in covering this area..." and then goes on to name them!

Blogs require flexibility and speed.

The faster you react, the better. If you're able to turn your blogs around in hours rather than days, there's a good chance you'll hit nerves (some raw) among customers. News is only hot for a brief while. Delays of any kind due because of revision, hesitation, or prevarication (all signals of less-than-100 per cent commitment) introduce complications. The message is weakened, the train of thought is lost, and a hot blog opportunity goes cold. If you can't be fast, unflinching, and fearless, leave blogging alone.

Bob Lutz, the vice-president of General Motors hosts an online forum called Fast Lane. He has been quoted as saying, "People were already talking about us all over the Internet. This blog was an attempt to get GM more involved in the dialogue and to get people talking to us. We see this as a direct line to enthusiasts, supporters – and detractors." Perhaps I've turned you off the very thought of blogs. That's good - it could save enormous effort and financial loss. If you feel timorous about any of the above guidelines, leave blogging alone. But if your company is prepared to take the chance, the rewards could be astounding.

Blogging is a fast-growing phenomenon. According to *Business Week*, some 400,000 new blogs appear each day. The attention span they require is short and the purview they offer shortsighted. However, if you're prepared to invest freedom and authority in a perceptive, razor-sharp blogger; if your brand conveys a sense of certainty and opinion in its personality and core values; if your organization can respond unhesitatingly to issues with

freedom, flexibility, and speed, this could be your blogging moment.

About Martin Lindstrom

Martin Lindstrom is recognized by the Chartered Institute of Marketing as one of the world's primary branding gurus. He is an advisor to several Fortune 100 brands including Disney, Mars, Pepsi, American Express, Mercedes-Benz, Reuters, McDonald's,



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