

# Don't Get Blogged Down

## Why Corporations Need to Understand Blogs

**W**eb logs, more commonly known as blogs, have been around since the late 1990s, but only now are they becoming commonly known. Blogs offer numerous public relations opportunities to savvy corporations, but they also carry some potential problems. Knowing what blogs are, who writes them, how they can be used, and what their pitfalls are will enable you to understand this journalistic format.

Bloggers (as the authors of Web logs are called) consider themselves journalists, and in some ways that's quite literal. The first blogs were journals on the Internet, with the HTML coded by hand. Modern bloggers use specialized software to post their articles to their blog. Blogs are updated frequently, and the posts are listed in reverse-chronological order, with the newest article appearing first. Besides the articles (which are also referred to as posts or entries), a typical blog will have the following elements:

- **Comments:** Readers can leave remarks on individual articles as a blog-equivalent to a letter to the editor.
- **Blogroll:** A list of links to other blogs the blogger reads. One widely used measure of a blog's impact is the number of blogs linking to articles or the entire blog. Sites like Technorati ([www.technorati.com/](http://www.technorati.com/)) and Blogpulse ([www.blogpulse.com/index.html](http://www.blogpulse.com/index.html)) rank blogs according to the number of blogs linking to them.
- **RSS feed:** An RSS (Rich Site Summary) feed is a stream of data a blog will send out when queried by another computer. Special newsreaders can take a blog's RSS feed and notify the blog's readers when a new article has been posted.
- **Static pages:** Entries that tell something about the blogger or collect information readers typically seek in one place.
- **Tags:** Bloggers can tag a post with a topic, like "sports," "cooking," "technology" or "movies." Sites like Technorati will list all blog articles on a tagged topic, making it easy to target a particular topic.
- **Advertisements:** Not all blogs carry advertisements. When a blog readership is over a certain number, advertisements can pay for the cost of the Web site or even provide a steady income to the blogger. Advertisers tend to like blogs because the readership is defined, usually around a particular topic. This enables targeted advertising to be more effective.

### HOW ARE BLOGS CREATED?

The software to create blogs tends to be "server-side." A blogger uses a blog creation Web site such as Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com)) or loads software like Movable Type or WordPress to their personal Web site. The blog itself is created by logging onto the appropriate Web site, creating the layout of the blog (color, format, background pictures, etc.) and typing in

the articles that make up the majority of the blog. Little to no software resides on the computer, preparing bloggers for what many see as the next stage in computer software.

The topics a blog covers are up to the blogger. Some blogs are about single issues, such as technology, entertainment or politics. Others are more personal journals where the topics can be wide-ranging. Some blogs are used by corporations to develop customer interest, satisfaction, and loyalty, as well as publicize upcoming products. Companies that use blogs tend to be involved in either technology or entertainment.

### WHAT ADVANTAGES DO BLOGS HAVE FOR CORPORATIONS?

Blogs have multiple advantages for corporations. Because they are constantly updated, they tend to rise rapidly in search engine results. The constant updating also keeps readers coming back for more, which keeps the corporation name and products in the reader's minds. Blog readers tend to be technologically knowledgeable, and so money spent on advertising through blogs tends to be effective. Movie studios have explored the use of blogs about particular movie projects as a way of increasing the buzz about a particular movie; blogs have become a frequent target for viral marketing, although this has also created a backlash in some cases.

Comments give many readers a feeling of community with the blog. The linking of one blog to another is another form of feedback that intensifies the feeling of community. This community is referred to by bloggers as the "blogoverse." The word is a combination of blog and universe, and refers to the universe of bloggers.

### WHAT PROBLEMS CAN BLOGS CAUSE FOR CORPORATIONS?

Although they see themselves as journalists, bloggers generally do not have a background in journalism. The lack of training leaves them less equipped to deal with ethical questions and more susceptible to libelous remarks or embarrassing public blunders. Because a blog is essentially an online journal, the tone of the articles tends to be informal, and the blogger may forget that the blog is scoured by search engine robots, making private, off-the-cuff comments available to the entire world.

Several bloggers have been fired by their companies for activities related to blogging. The first bloggers fired were elevated to "blogger martyr" status by the blogoverse. One of the first, Ellen Simonetti, blogged anonymously as "Queen of the Sky." When her employer, Delta Airline, discovered her blog and the very personal events recorded there relating to what occurred at work, Simonetti was fired. Predictably, lawsuits followed.

Some blogs are set up to deliberately attack a company. The bloggers are usually customers or former employees who have had a bad experience with the company. Sites from disgruntled people are not new, but the advantages and simplicity of blogging has

created a migration from traditional Web site to the blogverse.

Comment spam is a new problem for bloggers. Some unethical groups have used computer programs to automate posting of comments to blogs. The comments are designed to advertise the typical range of spam products, and many are obscene. A corporate blog could suddenly find itself linked to material with which it would never want to be associated.

#### WHAT CAN A COMPANY DO TO PROTECT ITSELF?

Employers need to include in the organizational policy manual language that includes blogging when discussing confidentiality and representation of the employer. Reminders that everything reflects back to the organization will help well-intentioned employees to remain professional in the context of their employer. When a corporation provides access to blogging tools for its employees, specific policies need to be set in place. Borland has a good example of such a policy for its employees who blog using the Borland Weblog Server. The policy explains that employee bloggers represent the company and how they need to behave to not damage company interests or cause themselves legal problems. The entire policy can be found at: <http://blogs.borland.com/johnk/archive/2005/05/03/4148.aspx>

From the employer's perspective, it is important to scan the Internet for mentions of their company. Sites such as the aforementioned Technorati, Blogpulse, and Google Blog Search are good ways to find out what is being said about their corporation.

When dealing with bloggers, strongly worded threats from the legal department may cause some to remove objectionable con-

tent, but it may make others extremely recalcitrant. Blogger tradition is that nothing is removed from a blog. Corrections may be added to an article, but all content is permanent. Given the ephemeral nature of blogs (most bloggers only blog for about 6 months), the permanence of blogs is more of a myth than a reality. But bloggers tend to take an extreme view of the First Amendment, ignoring years of jurisprudence putting necessary limits on those rights. Where possible, it's better to start off reasoning with a blogger. Asking for a chance to publish a polite, friendly and humorous rebuttal on the site may accomplish more from a public relations standpoint than a lawsuit.

#### WHERE NEXT?

As a blogger and not a lawyer, I will be watching for clarification on the rules regarding content as we once again test the legal system. Technology professionals are challenged daily with new platforms and ways to access information and blogging must be added to the "watch list" at the very least. Whether your company has a blog, blogging employees, or simply needs to keep track of what is being said about the company by bloggers, a working knowledge of what Web logs are and how they are changing the Internet landscape is critical. Understanding how blogging can be used and abused will help avoid problems and provide significant benefits.

As a blogger, I applaud the use of blogs as a new platform and am hopeful that ethical use will grow with understanding.

*Rob Carr has been a freelance technical writer for the last 10 years and is an award-winning blogger.*

## IT Asset Management Negotiations - Are You A Victim or Active Participant?

### Find the Win-Win Path to IT Negotiations in this 2 Day Training Course and Workshop

*Why do organizations negotiate? How should a negotiation be conducted? What else should I do to maximize the opportunity for the organization? The International Association of IT Asset Managers' Negotiation Skills for the IT Asset Manager training course and workshop is designed to answer these questions and many more for IT Asset Managers, whether you are the lead negotiator or a member of the team. This course is specifically designed to not only enhance standard negotiation skills, but to identify the unique aspects of IT agreements and to prepare strategies that keep the negotiations moving along a productive path.*

*This advanced course instructs the IT Asset Manager on how to navigate the negotiations process to effectively communicate the requirements of the organization while adhering to the fundamentals of an ITAM program, the organization's goals and the best practices for negotiations. Role playing and team workshops are included in the course to hone skills and facilitate immediate integration of new ideas into the attendee's negotiating practices.*

**Current Schedule includes the following dates:**

- August 23-24th in Cleveland, OH
- November 7-8th in Orlando, FL (before the 2005 IAITAM Annual Conference)

**To learn more about the IAITAM Negotiation Skills for the IT Asset Manager course and become an active participant in your organization's IT negotiations process, call +1.866.9IAITAM (+1.866.942.4826), email [info@iaitam.org](mailto:info@iaitam.org) or visit [www.iaitam.org](http://www.iaitam.org)**