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THE JOURNAL REPORT: SMALL BUSINESS

Managing Technology Blog It and They May Come

Small businesses find blogging can be useful -- but awfully time consuming

By SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN
August 20, 2007; Page R5

A few months after launching a blog early last year, Get It In Writing Inc. started seeing traffic to its Web site soar.

Today the small marketing-copywriting firm in Boca Raton, Fla., draws as many as 150,000 unique visitors a month to its site, compared with an average of only 100 before the blog, which features advice and trends on marketing and resides within the company's Web site.

THE JOURNAL REPORT



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But Allison Nazarian, the company's 36-year-old founder and president, says all that traffic didn't lead to more sales right away. In fact, the site's sudden popularity even brought on a new financial burden. "We ended up having to upgrade our Web site's

hosting plan so it could accommodate that level of traffic," she says.

Now, the number of new clients is finally on the rise, as are sales, she says. So far this year, 25% of new prospects have come by way of the company's Web site. Before the blog was launched, it was 1%, and most new clients came through word-of-mouth and referrals. Sales also are up by 18% so far this year from a year earlier, she adds.

Blogging is "worth it," says Ms. Nazarian, "but you definitely need patience."

Most owners use blogs -- which are easy to set up and require little technical savvy -- to drive people to their company Web site. But entrepreneurs also use them to get consumer feedback or answer commonly asked questions. And some blogs serve as stand-ins for Web sites as a way to describe what a business does.

Nice to Visit, but...

Still, getting people to visit isn't the same as getting them to buy.

"A blog can help you...establish your credibility and expertise, and that is what encourages people to click and buy," says Debbie Weil, an author and corporate blogging consultant in Washington, D.C. "But it takes time achieve it. You don't get instant high search-engine rankings. It's a fallacy to think you blog and you sell."

Small-business owners often create blogs to boost their company Web sites' search-engine rankings. High rankings can help draw more visitors to a site because people tend to click on the top results of a search first.



WRITE IT UP

What's New: Small-business owners are increasingly turning to blogs as a marketing tool.

The Uses: Most owners use blogs to drive people to their Web sites. For others, it's a place to post information and get customer feedback. Some even use a blog in place of a Web site.

Search engines rank blogs with fresh content higher than ones that are rarely updated, says Caroline Melberg, president of Melberg Marketing Inc., an online-marketing firm in Wayzata, Minn. So the higher a blog is

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The Caveat: Although a blog may get more people to visit a site, it won't necessarily get them to buy.

ranked, the greater the chances of consumers finding it, she says.

Indeed, fresh blog content has brought lots of visitors to Ms. Nazarian's site. In addition to writing two to four brief entries on her blog each week, she posts lengthy ones twice a month titled "Amazing Advertisements." These generate the most traffic, she says, and feature snapshots of clever advertisements from around the globe, plus pithy commentary. The company promotes the entries by submitting them to user-generated social Web sites such as Digg.com and Reddit.com, which publicize online items recommended by members.

Feeding the Appetite

But coming up with compelling content on a regular basis for a blog can be time consuming. Ms. Nazarian says a contract employee responsible for Internet marketing at her firm spends between one and five hours scouring the Web for interesting ads to profile in just one "Amazing Advertisements" entry.

Other bloggers are having better luck turning blog readers into customers.

Since Tracy L. Coenen started her blog, Fraudfiles, in November 2005, she has seen a considerable boost in revenue for her private forensic-accounting practice, Sequence Inc. The Milwaukee-based firm's revenue rose 31% last year from 2005, and is expected to climb 50% this year from 2006, Ms. Coenen says. She spends about 30 to 45 minutes a day posting as many as three entries on her blog, offering news and opinions about her specialty. The blog is located within the company's Web site, www.sequence-inc.com.

Before the blog, Ms. Coenen says, "I don't think I ever had a case that came to me because of my Web site." She says she currently handles about 20 cases a year, and six have come from the blog since it launched. She adds that each case generates revenue ranging from \$5,000 to \$25,000.

Making the Link

Ty's Toy Box Inc., an online retailer based in Erlanger, Ky., has lured people to its blog about trends in the toy-licensing industry by having other blogs and Web sites link to it. The company arranged a link-exchange agreement in April with TheToyGuy.com, a Web site from toy-industry expert Chris Byrne that features news and product reviews.

"We coordinated it so that occasionally our blog and Chris's blog are about the same issue, but from different perspectives," says George Stolpe, vice president of business development and media relations for Ty's Toy Box. The two blogs link to each other in each post, he says.

Ms. Melberg says the links help boost a company's search-engines ranking because blogs recommended by external sources rank higher than ones without link referrals.

According to Mr. Stolpe, Ty's Toy Box pays a free-lance writer to maintain its blog and says the total cost for it is "a very minimal amount." He says while he can't quantify the blog's role in the near-triple-digit average growth in sales every year since its start, he has no doubt it has played an important part.

Sharing Information

For some businesses, a blog isn't so much about bringing in new traffic to boost sales as it is about sharing information with customers and getting feedback.

In May, Michael Hyatt, chief executive officer of Thomas Nelson Inc., posted an entry in his blog, michaelhyatt.com, asking for input on the cover design of a new book that the publishing company was preparing to put out. Readers were invited to select one of three images, and the company went with the picture that earned the most votes.

But the commentary hasn't always been positive. Two years ago, Mr. Hyatt wrote about how Thomas Nelson, which has about 650 employees, donated around 100,000 bibles to victims of Hurricane Katrina. Several readers posted comments on the blog that criticized the effort, including that donating resources such as food and shelter would have made more sense.

But Mr. Hyatt, who devotes about three hours a week to blogging, says the reaction only bolstered the authenticity of his blog as a source of honest communication between the company and its customers.

Jonathan Ham, an independent enterprise-security consultant in Missoula, Mont., uses his blog to answer client questions that may be of wider interest. He adds new entries to his blog (located within his company's Web site, jhamcorp.com) about twice a month. Mr. Ham says he's under no pressure to write more often because he isn't concerned about boosting traffic to the company's site.

Better Than a Site

In some cases, blogs are actually taking the place of a company Web site.

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Take London-based tailor Thomas Mahon, whose blog, called English Cut, is about the tailoring process, or as he puts it, "what happens when you order a suit for \$4,000." Mr. Mahon's entries discuss his normal business routine, including his travels to meet clients and photos of him cutting and stitching materials. He says his Web journal helps lend more credibility to his work than a Web site could because he can profile projects as they're being developed without the professional help he would need to regularly update a Web site.

Before launching his blog in late 2005, Mr. Mahon, who employs five subcontracted tailors, says he landed all client accounts through word-of-mouth -- even though he had a Web site, which he has since abandoned. Now he gets twice as many referrals and has had to limit the number of suits he can produce a year to about 150. Previously, he made between 50 and 60 suits a year.

--Ms. Needleman is a reporter for WSJ.com in South Brunswick, N.J.

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