

Blogs Matter!

Think the world of blogging belongs to techies, hipsters and political junkies? Think again. Blogging is for everyone.

The ultimate marketplace of ideas and information, the blogosphere is media by and for the people like never seen before. It's time to stop lamenting the tightening of corporate reigns on television and newspapers and embrace the new citizen journalism. Get connected. Be a part of the information flow. Have your voice represented. Now is the time to participate.

Get to Know the Blogosphere

WHY? Bloggers are thought leaders. In this great marketplace, bloggers are the vendors selling their wares. By offering ideas and information for consumption and debate by whoever cares to read, they shape public opinion and lead new trends. And unlike traditional media sources, bloggers provide both punditry and analysis unfettered by the pretense of objectivity. Following bloggers in your field allows you to view an issue from all sides and gauge where a discussion is heading.

Blogs provide the most current news. A blog posting can be distributed the instant it is written, and serious bloggers position themselves right in the middle of the action. As events change, blogs can help you stay on top of issues that interest you.

Blogs are an institutional memory. Blogs' archival properties allow you to track the development of ideas and perspectives over time to better understand the roots of public opinion.

WARNING!

Blogs can be used to conduct opposition research. Read through postings of conservative blogs and keep up with the messages and ideas they are putting forward, but be careful. Google strings can track who is coming to a blog and from where. News of a progressive organization found monitoring a conservative blog can become an incriminating and sensational posting for the "other side."

Beware of bad information. Because anyone and everyone can start their own blog, it's important to read blogs with a critical eye. Many bloggers take journalism seriously and will research and cite the information they are presenting. But others are not as diligent. Sift through blogs carefully and verify the accuracy of information, especially if you plan to pass it on to others.

HOW? Put together a list of the most influential blogs in your space. If you work on water and sanitation issues, for example, find the blogs that write the most on this topic. If you don't have time to gather this list, ask an intern or volunteer to do the research.

Read previous posts to familiarize yourself with each blog's perspective.

Sign up for RSS feeds or email alerts. Keep abreast of what's being written and how people are reacting. If you feel inspired, comment on the posts yourself.

Join the Conversation

WHY? Blogs give you voice. Blogs are open forums, meaning there's no editor there to reject your letters. Targeted, intelligent comments will be welcomed by other readers and increase your organization's visibility. Comments can also be used to gauge public reaction to an idea. Elicit debate and conversation by posting a comment that spurs discussion.

Blogs influence mainstream media. The mainstream media increasingly looks to the blogosphere for new information and trends, and to get the "internet angle" on issues they are covering. Adding your voice to the blogosphere gives you a chance to influence traditional media coverage.

HOW? Post comments. Comments are generally short and sweet. This is not the place for a long-winded academic thesis. Keep your comments on point, and read subsequent comments and posts to see how your ideas were received.

Offer content. If you have more substantial material to offer a blog or its authors, reach out. Write to them directly and ask if they are open to additional information for future coverage. But be realistic and only contact them if what you have to offer can truly add value to their blog. If all goes well, a blogger may invite you to "guest blog" or write a post on your behalf.

Start Your Own Blog

WHY? Blogs can be your megaphone. Blog postings can be found easily through search engines. The more you post, the more a search engine is pinged and the higher your organization rises in search results. This increases the chances of your organization being seen by the larger public.

Blogs are resources for your members. With the proliferation of information on the web, more and more people are turning to trusted peers to filter it for them. You can use your blog to help members stay up-to-date on the issues they care about, whether through original content or links to other blogs.

WARNING!

Blogs are hard to control. Unlike traditional media sources that pick and choose editorials, the blogosphere is open to everyone. That's great for you when you are commenting on someone else's blog, but it also means that anyone can comment and post their opinions on yours. This can be dangerous territory for an organization that is concerned about controlling message.

Blog faux pas. The only thing worse than missing an opportunity to participate in the blogosphere is to botch it by going in ignorant of blogger ethics and etiquette. Before you start your own blog, make sure you read a book or two on current conventions. We recommend *Naked Conversations* by Robert Scoble and Shel Israel.

Blogs can be your community. Blogs are a forum for communities of like-minded people who share interests to gather around specific topics. Taking part in a blogging community allows you to develop ongoing relationships that

can be leveraged to help with your organizational efforts and give you a sympathetic audience should your organization face a crisis.

Blogs can be a testing ground. With thousands of readers, blogs are an easy way to conduct message testing and audience research. Write a post and test readers' reactions to ideas, messaging and points of view.

HOW? Ask yourself a few questions:

- » *Do I have something compelling to say?* No one will read your blog if it's boring!
- » *Is my perspective new and different?* With so many blogs out there, differentiation is key to building readership.
- » *Do I have time to post regularly?* To keep readers coming back, you'll need to keep content fresh. Make sure you have the human resources to post new information on a regular basis.
- » *Am I prepared to handle public interaction?* Not everyone will like what you are writing. Make sure you are thick skinned enough to deal with the criticism and not take it too personally. You also need to be vigilant in responding to controversial and offensive language.

Further Reading

Getting Linked: A guide to finding, courting and making lasting relationships with the bloggers of your dreams, by Free Range Studios.
<http://www.freerange.com/resources.html>

We The Media: Grassroots Journalism On Line, by Dan Gillmor.

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