

Using Blogs as a Free Marketing Tool for Your Business

by Ivana Katz

I admit I stuck my head in the sand when I first heard about Blogs. It was just too hard (so I thought) - another new technology to master and I wasn't even sure of the benefits, so I ignored them for a while.

Then I attended a marketing seminar where a whole session was devoted to Blogs - how simple they were to set up and use and what unbelievable benefits they provided for a business. And the best part - most of them are free!!!!

SO WHAT EXACTLY IS A BLOG?

A blog is basically a journal that is available on the web. The activity of updating a blog is "blogging" and someone who keeps a blog is a "blogger." Blogs are typically updated daily or weekly using software that allows people with little or no technical background to update and maintain the blog.

WHY SHOULD I USE BLOGS FOR MY BUSINESS?

1. Communication with your customers.

Blogs provide a way for you to communicate with your customers directly. And it is a two-way communication. You can post a message on your blog and your visitors can easily respond. Staying in touch with your customers regularly means you can build long-lasting relationships and develop their trust.

2. Search Engine Marketing

Blogs give you an increased presence on major search engines, like Yahoo! and Google. If you use Blogger (Google's Blogging Tool), every message you post

creates a new page on Google so in a very short time you could have a lot of pages pointing to your website, bringing you lots of new visitors.

3. Stay Ahead of Your Competition

Blogs are still relatively new and chances are your competition does not yet use them. So you will be seen as an expert in your industry when you post your knowledge and expertise.

4. Media & Public Relations

Blogs are excellent PR tools. You can post your Media Releases and articles and have them picked up by the media.

5. Free or Low Cost

Many Blogs are free to use. Two such blogs are:
Blogger - www.blogger.com
Clearblogs - www.clearblogs.com

6. Easy to Use

If you can type and press a "Publish" button, you can use blogging software.

The software allows you to follow easy step by step guide and provides great online help.

WHAT SHOULD I PUBLISH IN MY BLOG?

1. Articles
2. Media Releases
3. Industry News
4. Photos of your products or from a tradeshow
5. Surveys - so you can get feedback from your customers
6. Testimonials
7. Instructions on how to use your products/services
8. Product Reviews
9. Interviews
10. Case Studies
11. Business and Employee Profiles
12. Links to complementary businesses
13. Frequently Asked Questions and Problem Resolutions
14. Inspirational Quotes
15. Research Findings



...and anything else that may be of interest or help to your visitors and customers.

To see what a blog looks like, go to: <http://websites4smallbusiness.blogspot.com/>

Remember you can have as many blogs as you like, so you can easily reach niche markets.

HOW DO I GET STARTED?

Simply sign up for a free account with Blogger, for example. Go to www.blogger.com. Then go to Getting Started in the Help Section and read it. There are lots of useful tips on how to make the most of your blog.

Once you've created a blog and added a message or two, don't forget to put a link to it from your website (if you have one).

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WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY BLOG ONCE IT'S CREATED?

Beside adding regular posts, you should add RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication) to your blog. RSS is a method of distributing links to content in your blog that you'd like others to use. In other words, it's a mechanism to "syndicate" your content.

HOW DOES RSS SYNDICATION WORK?

Say you publish a new blog posting about a particular topic. You want others interested in that topic to know about it. By listing the page as an "item" in your RSS file, you can have the page appear in front of those who read information using RSS readers or "news aggregators" RSS also allows people to easily add links to your content within their own web pages. Bloggers are a huge core audience that especially do this.

Blogs provide you with many benefits and they are free to use. So why not try them out - you have nothing to lose!

If you'd like to learn more about setting up, promoting and making money from blogs, you need to read "Blogging For Dollars" - <http://www.marketingtips.com/trafficsecrets/1875347>

Ivana Katz is the owner of Websites 4 Small Business, a company specialising in the design and promotion of growing, small and home-based business websites. She believes that every business deserves to have a successful website, no matter what its budget is. ivana@web4business.com.au - <http://www.web4business.com.au>.

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Cost Reduction

by Michael Syme, Business Diagnostics & Solutions.

Most businesses focus on sales, some also focus on gross margins and yet businesses that are successfully managing both these issues can still fail if they are not controlling costs!

The first step in controlling costs is measurement - it is impossible to control something that you cannot measure.

Therefore it is imperative that management has access to timely and accurate profit and loss reports.

Costs must be categorised in sufficient detail so that analysis is meaningful - grouping all costs as "cost of sales" or "expenses" does not provide enough information for analysis.

It is useful to analyse costs directly relating to the provision of the product or service as components of "cost of sales". These typically include cost of material/product sold and cost of direct labour i.e. the labour of the people directly involved in manufacture or face to face provision of service to the customer.

This enables you to calculate your gross margin (the difference between sales and cost of sales value divided by the sale value) - there is no correct answer for what this percentage should be as it depends on your situation and industry, but if it is well below 50% you may not be earning enough to pay for the expenses of the business.

Depending on the size of the business, you may find it useful to analyse expenses under general headings of production, sales, admin and warehouse expenses. These are the normal classifications for grouping, but you still need to analyse each individual expense type.

The easiest way to analyse each expense is as a percentage of the sales

value. As your business grows, it might be legitimate for some expenses to grow as well, but they should decrease as a percentage of the sales value. Look for items that are consuming a high percentage of your sales value and ask whether this

level of expense is necessary in your business.

Once again there is no single rule about what each expense type should be, but keep in mind that for every dollar you sell, x% is being lost due to each expense. This is an ideal area for benchmarking your performance to see how your business compares with others - talk to others in your industry or consultants who have experience in this area

You work hard to make each sale - don't waste it on unnecessary expense. Each time you incur expenses in the business, you should ask yourself if it is really necessary to generate sales, reduce future expenses, or meet your legal obligations (for OHS etc). If not, why do you need to spend it? Even if the expense is unavoidable, can it be deferred to a later date (cash should always be preserved)

The biggest cost component for most small businesses is labour costs, and it is also an area that can quickly get out of control. Ensure that the people you have are fully utilised and that overtime is minimised. If you are a growing small business think about flexible ways of adding labour that might not require the cost of a full extra person - casual, part time or contract labour might be a short term solution until that extra full-time person is really needed.

For more tips, contact Michael Syme, Business Diagnostics & Solutions on (02) 9555 5578 or email: info@bdsi.com.au or visit our website www.bdsi.com.au



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