

“ I would say that 99 per cent of small business owners need to step up and do more marketing
- Ivana Katz



Ivana Katz believes web logs can be an effective tool for attracting potential customers.

Picture PUJ10813:
JOEMURPHY

A chip off the old blog

THE term blogging hadn't even appeared in the Australian press before 2000. Now the phenomenon seems to be sweeping the world.

To many people it still conjures up visions of geeks and self-obsessed teens cluttering up cyberspace with their daily web diaries.

But it may be time for businesses to take a different view. Some of the more forward-thinking among them are already using blogs, or web logs, as a powerful new marketing tool. Some of the advantages are obvious, like having access to an instant channel for two-way communication that



business

Sue Hoban

allows feedback from existing and potential customers.

They are also cheap and easy to use.

Local business blogger and adviser Ivana Katz, founder of Websites 4 Small Business, said anyone who could type an email and press a button could set up and maintain their own blog.

All they have to do is select a blogging tool - many are free - and follow a few simple steps.

Other advantages like search engine optimisation are less obvious. But, in an era when so many customers do their research on the net, the advantage of a more prominent search engine listing can't be understated.

Ms Katz said blogging could be a very effective tool for attracting the volume of

traffic to achieve this. "It's not easy to do it with a website without paying to have your website optimised but the beautiful thing about a blog is that you can very easily optimise each posting by making certain key words prominent in the URL of the blog, in the heading and in the content," she said. "The more you feature your key words in those areas the more prominently you will be listed."

She said businesses should not regard blogs as just another channel for advertising or hard-core selling.

Web tool that's catching on

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They were most effective when used to impart information and build a community of interested readers. "The advantage is if you establish yourself as an expert by posting as much as you can, people will be automatically drawn to you and your business and you won't have to do the hard-core selling," she said.

While there is little argument about the potential of business blogs, there is some debate about their value for small business where limited resources make it difficult to meet one of the essentials for effectiveness - regular posting and monitoring.

Ivana Katz believes it is a matter of testing the market and prioritising marketing efforts according to what works best.

"I would say that 99 per cent of small business owners need to step up and do more marketing and that takes time whether it be writing media releases or advertising. A blog is a very simple and cheap way of marketing your business and exposing it to a global audience."

Manly direct marketing specialist Malcolm Auld has taken a cautious approach to setting up a blog for his business, Malcolm Auld Direct, after seeing the difficulty colleagues have had maintaining theirs. He now plans to launch one in the new financial year.

"The big thing I have to consider is what am I going to give up to do my blog, what hour in the day," he said.

"Once you start they don't stop, they're a living thing and you need to monitor them daily. I have watched colleagues in the industry set up blogs where the content ran out of steam because they really struggled to find the time to get content that was worth reading and passing on."

He said those planning a blog needed to factor in that the more successful it proved to be, the more time and resources it would consume.

But he said that wasn't a negative if the blog generated a community of people interested enough in the company and its products.

He said companies should not expect it to be all things to all people because, while one segment of the market might embrace the concept of blogs, others would never go near them.

He said similarly some small businesses might struggle to keep customers engaged enough in a blog to want to interact with it. "If I was running a small office equipment supply business selling photocopiers and printers I'm not sure how engaged customers would be, but if a supplier like that had good insight into recycling and sustainability, something that could add some value to the customer service, it may be worth thinking about," he said.

Hugo Ortega, owner of specialist tablet PC supplier Tegatech, started his blog, devoted to tablet PC news and information,



Direct marketing specialist Malcolm Auld plans to launch a blog in the new financial year.

Picture FOP1003:
JOE MURPHY

just over a year ago. It is now among the top three blogs in the world on the topic.

Thousands of people visit it daily and it is often used as a source of information for mainstream media.

He estimates business still makes up only 2-3 per cent of the blogging population but says many among that small group still make the mistake of allowing their blogs to be too promotional, a turn-off for readers who then see them as exploitive.

"Setting up a blog wasn't a marketing decision for me, it was a way of branding myself as an expert in this field," he said. "What happens is that the expert will build up a community around him by feeding useful information, in my case on the use and function of tablets, so the community starts to go, 'Hey, this guy knows a lot', and they then talk about me to each other.

"Because of that my Google ranking is quite high so when someone searches for the key words I appear quite quickly."

He said businesses could derive benefit from blogs by using them in a variety of ways, such as gauging customer sentiment and gaining real time feedback on new plans or products.

"Another way of using them is to expose the inner workings of your business so people can get a more personalised view; almost like the equivalent of an open door policy, so you are giving them a sense of direct interaction with the company," he said.

Mr Ortega said Microsoft had used this to good effect by having programmer blogs which allowed readers to feel more involved in the development process.

BUILDING YOUR BLOG

TIPS

■ Put the effort into building a rapport with your readership. If you build a community around your blog you will be building a community around your business.

■ Report promptly on events that shape your industry. Readers want to hear an opinion from the expert.

■ Always know your subject. Tell them what you know and know what you tell them.

TRAPS

■ Do not turn your blog into a promotional campaign. People will not read blogs that sound like an advertisement.

■ Never blog yourself into a corner by promising anything you cannot deliver.

■ Don't criticise your competition.
Source - Hugo Ortega

POSSIBLE CONTENT

■ Articles on topical subjects related to your company or industry

■ Your take on the latest industry news

■ Surveys

■ Case studies

■ Frequently asked questions

■ Research findings



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