

Chapter 3

How Much Blog— and How Often?

If you've taken our advice and have fired up a “starter” blog, you've got a taste of what's required of you and your team in order to maintain at least a minimal presence in the blogosphere. As you are likely aware by now, blogging is fairly simple—but it's not effortless.

As many potential bloggers have learned the hard way, a blog without the resources to support it can turn a good idea into an embarrassing situation. A 2004 survey by Perseus Development Corporation found that 66 percent of surveyed blogs had not been updated in two months, making almost three million blogs that had been for all practical purposes abandoned. If you want your blog(s) to avoid this fate, make sure your company's resources and cultures align.

In this chapter, we'll cover the resource needs that business bloggers will want to consider, and how to rally the troops behind a blogging initiative.

What's It Going to Take?

As with many business initiatives, there's some circular logic that needs to be dealt with in the early stages of blog planning. The chicken-and-egg situation is that you can't easily ask for specific company resources when launching a business blog until you know what you need, yet you don't want to initiate extensive planning on a campaign unless you have an idea of what assets are available.

Fortunately, with a blogging initiative, there are two factors in play that make life much easier for you as you start to plan. One is that you don't need to launch an expensive and labor-intensive project to get many of the benefits of blogging. Even a simple and inexpensive presence in the blogosphere can reap dividends.

Another factor is that growing a very small blog initiative into something bigger is relatively straightforward. An organization can apply more resources to a blog (or series of blogs) to grow the presence and audience without facing significant growing pains. In other words, blogging is not like the manufacturing hard goods; you don't need to buy land, build a new factory, and get showroom space to expand your operations.

In Chapter 1, "Meet the Blogs," we described a spectrum of corporate blogging approaches available to you. These included a couple of very low risk options that don't require any employees to actually blog. In this chapter, we'll focus on the alternatives that will require team members to be actively involved in posting and maintaining a business blogging presence. We'll describe what levels of cost and time commitment would be required to put each into action.

Once we've laid out the scenarios, you can factor in what's realistic for your organization, and make a plan of action.

A Basic Blog

At the most basic level, you can set up a minimal presence with a free or inexpensive blog account on a hosted service like Blogger, TypePad, or Blog Harbor and have someone post as little as three to four times a week. While you can post less often than this, remember that search engines factor in frequency of updates when ranking results—so it's best to do what you can to post more often.

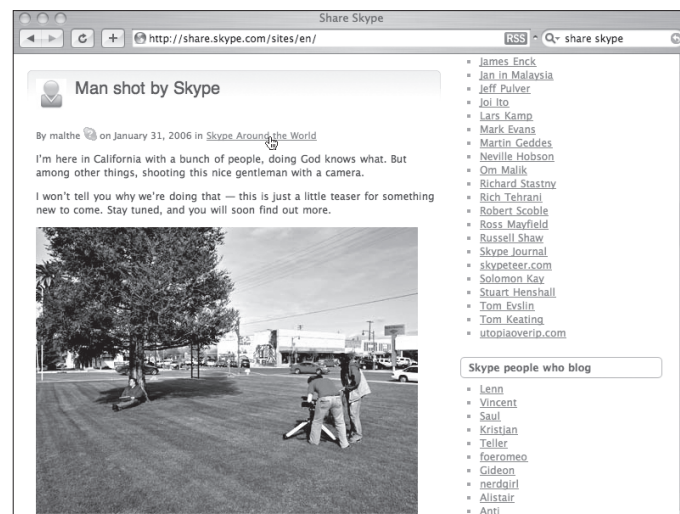
Part of this obligation should include time spent monitoring what other bloggers might be saying about your business and responding to their posts or comments. We'll cover this more thoroughly in Chapter 8, "Launching Your Blog and Getting Noticed."

The cash requirements for such a low-effort blog would be at most \$25 per month for a subscription to a hosted service, and you should reasonably budget for someone to spend four to five hours a week to maintain this minimal presence. Expect to dedicate 20 hours or so to launching the blog and mastering the initial learning curve.

A starter level blog can be run by a single trusted individual who has the knowledge and judgment to make intelligent posts and won't likely expose the organization to any legal liabilities or embarrassment. While it's best to always have formal blogging policies in place, many of the businesses that have deployed a single trusted part-time blogger have not established formal rules, and instead have an informal "use your best judgment" standard. For example, the managers at Internet telephony provider Skype know that their employees are going to use their best judgment when posting to the company blog, Share Skype (www.share.skype.com/sites/en). The blog, started as a way for employees to share what they think is cool about the product, the company, and the user community, is low-budget, low-effort, and lots of fun for both Skype employees and customers (**Figure 3.1**).

Figure 3.1

Share Skype builds a community between Skype employees and their customers.



A Full-Time Blog

To pursue an expanded presence, some companies have established either a single “full-time” blog or multiple “part-time” blogs in hopes of achieving a higher level of benefits. Both scenarios require significantly more time and effort than the basic level, but can reap big rewards. For a full-time blog, you might have one dedicated person involved, or a team of people contributing to the site.

The QuickBooks Online Weblog is an example of a single blog with a team of contributors, and IBM’s developerWorks blogs typify a group of individual writers contributing to their own individual blogs under a corporate umbrella.

In either plan, many more total posts a week will be written, and more planning is required. In this scenario, you’d almost certainly want to graduate from a free blogging service to a paid one with more features, and one that can allow for multiple blogs to be hosted from a single user account.

For a multiple blog scenario, it’s most likely best to host the blogs on your own servers (which we’ll cover in more depth in Chapter 5, “Tools and Implementation”). Implementation will primarily depend on the availability of technical staff or the money available to fund blog-savvy consultants.

It’s likely that for this more comprehensive scenario, a formal blogging policy would be put into place. Plan on potentially dozens of hours and several meetings to establish an appropriate policy for your needs. (For more specifics on policies, see the sidebar “Establishing Guidelines and Policies,” below.)

The primary cost for this level is staff time spent posting, along with reading others’ posts and responding to comments, general planning, and establishing policies.

It’s conceivable that at this level of commitment an organization that executes well would over time gain a very healthy level of Google juice, and a nontrivial amount of mindshare from other prominent bloggers. Microsoft’s Robert Scoble, who we consider to be a “full-time” blogger, gets tens of thousands of influential visitors a day thanks to his efforts, and Google places his posts prominently in search results.

A Sponsored Blog

Instead of launching their own full-time blogs, companies like Connexion by Boeing, Sony, and McDonalds have all tried out the blogosphere by sponsoring blogs. As we discussed in Chapter 1, the inFlightHQ blog has been very successful for Connexion by Boeing. They're reaching the business traveler demographic and relying upon the expertise of the bloggers to do so. This "blog without blogging" effort will require coordination between your company, the blog publishers, and an ad agency. If you sign up to sponsor a blog, you'll want specific metrics and traffic results to measure the success. The companies we know, like Connexion, have found that sponsoring a blog is great way to try out their brand in the blogosphere and see how well blogging works for them.

A Companywide Blog

Some ambitious companies have taken the ultimate plunge and are empowering all employees to blog. Sun Microsystems is one of these organizations and has encouraged their 35,000 employees to share their work with the world without asking permission.

So far, 1000 employees have started blogging, and Sun has built a custom system to manage these employee sites.

Naturally, Sun has spent a great deal of time and effort creating a culture and set of guidelines that minimizes the risks of inappropriately posted information being put out for the world to see.

If you work for a large company like Sun, launching and maintaining this kind of comprehensive blogging campaign will almost certainly mean installing a dedicated hosting system, and requires allocating significant technical staff hours to monitor and manage the hardware and software that enables it. Conceivably, the direct expenses can range into tens of thousands of dollars annually.

Potentially the biggest cost to an employer is the loss of employee productivity as they focus precious time on blogging. Naturally, no company wants their employees to spend all of their time writing about their work; they'd rather just have them *doing* the work.

Sun has a policy that addresses this. Sun's position is that while they don't limit the amount of time an employee uses to blog, they do expect a blogging employee's workload to remain unchanged.

ESTABLISHING GUIDELINES AND POLICIES

One resource consideration you'll need to factor in is the need to dedicate some time with your team to decide what your company policies will be toward blogging. Some companies that blog don't institute a formal policy and it's certainly easiest not to draft one, but you'll at least want to be clear about what's expected from your bloggers.

Establishing guidelines is a pretty straightforward process. Fortunately, other companies have already done much of the groundwork for you. Many existing policies are available online to review, and experience demonstrates that even a bare bones policy can go a long way toward minimizing problems.

While Microsoft does not have an official policy regarding employee blogging, many of the bloggers agree that the unofficial guideline is simply "don't be stupid." Similarly, for some time Sun's blogging policy was simply "don't make forward-looking statements"—in other words, don't post about how next quarter's financials are shaping up.

You'll want to go online and look up some of the policies that are out there for review. Sun, IBM, Harvard Law School, and many other organizations have posted their rules for anyone to look at. In some cases, they've even documented how they reached those policies.

Some common rules to consider are:

- Identify yourself when posting. Make it clear on the blog who you are and what your role is at the company.
- Employees should make it known that the views expressed in the blog are theirs alone and do not necessarily represent the views of the employer.
- Write with respect toward the company, other employees, customers, partners, and competitors.
- Don't reveal any confidential or proprietary information.
- Don't let time spent blogging interfere with your work responsibilities.
- Employees must comply with other company policies, and rules outlined in the company handbook(s).
- Direct all press inquiries to your manager or the corporate communications department.
- When in doubt, ask your manager.

To read some of these policies, see the Corporate Blogging Wiki (www.socialtext.net/bizblogs/).

Assessing Resources, Barriers, and Culture

Compared to other marketing and communications initiatives with world-wide reach, it doesn't take much to launch and maintain a successful business blog. You'll need to bring to the table your goals, a small team with a little time, good ideas for content, and the support of your organization.

Take some time to inventory what assets are available to you, and determine whether or not they are adequate to get the job done. The specifics of what you'll need are detailed below.

Regular and Ongoing Posting

A blog without posts is like a city without buildings—there isn't a whole lot of motivation to visit, and not much to see when you get there. For public sites, readers (and search engines!) need a reason to drop by. Multiple posts are that reason. If contributors aren't making frequent and interesting contributions to the site, you'll find much of the oft-touted benefits of blogging evaporate.

While the most important thing is to write posts that are relevant to your audience, it's also vital that you do it frequently enough that search engines see the blog as an actively updated site and your readers have a reason to come back.

The topic of how often is enough is actively discussed in the blogosphere, and there are differing opinions. Based on discussions with various bloggers receiving significant traffic, our opinion is that three posts a week is a nice minimum to target and three a day is what can get you into the big leagues.

Staff Availability and Dedication

Posting is essential, and posting means people. People with the time, energy, and desire to write about relevant subjects. Luckily, we're not talking about a huge commitment here. Many successful blogs thrive with just a single passionate individual working only a few hours a day. Are you that person? Do you have people on staff (or who can be contracted) to contribute? We

believe that most high-profile marketing-related blogs need at least two good hours a day of effort to stay viable, and highly recommend that a team be formally assembled to ensure those hours will be put in before any public launch of a blog.

Be aware that in our experience the vast majority of good-intentioned “volunteer posters” who say they are “happy to help out” and will post won’t ever find the time. Have the commitment from contributors in writing, and have a designated manager or editor make sure posters are fulfilling their obligations. If the commitment and corporate buy-in are great enough, consider paying someone extra for their blogging or hiring a person just to blog.

Culture of Openness

Most of the companies known for having great success in the blogosphere have a culture of openness and transparency. These companies generally lean toward permitting “outsiders” to observe their operations—where practical—and even provide input. Open companies tend to let people see what they do and discuss themselves more openly.

With regard to blogging, Microsoft has a culture of openness. The company has embraced blogging as an important tool for reaching out to software developers, customers, and other partners. Microsoft now publishes over a thousand blogs on topics ranging from their new operating system to the minutiae of Internet Explorer’s font rendering. Many of these blogs contain references to upcoming products and even tout opinions that differ with stated company positions.

While we believe that almost all companies can and should blog, it’s clear that many of the corporate blogs we see today just won’t work in many organizations. For those companies, the stereotypical employee or executive blog containing posts discussing projects the author is working on just won’t cut it. In addition, openly accepting comments from outsiders critical of the company or their products is inconceivable to many managers.

With this in mind, one should gauge quickly how “open” their company might be to a dialog-style blog and reject the idea if the organization generally has a “loose lips sink ships” mindset. If your company is like Apple—

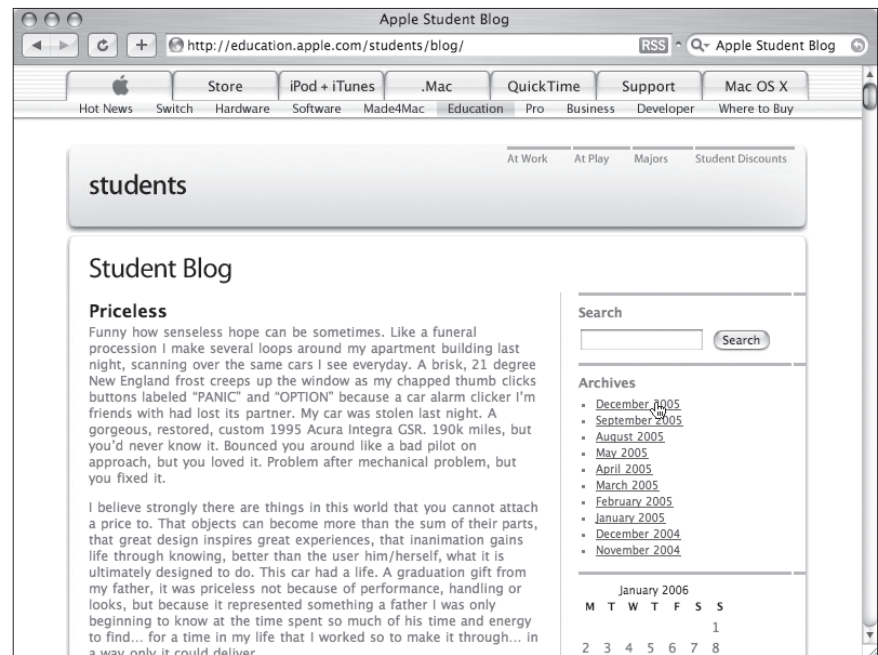
who carefully guard their secrets (and send lawyers after bloggers who reveal them!)—you just can't blog the same way Sun or Microsoft does.

If you determine that you have a fairly closed culture, it does not mean blogging is impossible. There are many good options available to you. Even the tightly constricted Apple culture has enabled successful blogs, and you can use that as a potential model for your efforts.

One of Apple's blogs (<http://education.apple.com/students/blog/>), shown in **Figure 3.2**, is for students with posts about campus life and using Apple products. The Apple Student Blog is about community, not about their corporation or Steve Jobs. Apple has also embraced blog-related technologies, like RSS. They have feeds available on most every page on their site, including technical note updates, Help files, and support forums available for subscription. Apple also publishes another blog about their .Mac service, which includes entries about how to best use the service. Apple is blogging in a manner that works for them and their culture.

Figure 3.2

Apple's blog is for the college lifestyle and discusses Apple's products. The key here is to plan and promote a realistic blog initiative that makes sense given the culture you have.



Financial Resources

While it's true that the hardware and software requirements to successfully run any single blog are minimal, maintaining a truly popular blog can become nearly a full-time job depending on the number of posts required, and the effort one wants to put in on monitoring comments. In other words, the time and opportunity costs can be significant.

In addition, those circumstances in which companies encourage all of their employees to blog may require the licensing of many copies of software or large-scale subscription costs.

Do your homework before picking a platform, and make sure you've factored in all costs. We'll get more specific about software and pricing in Chapter 5.

Fostering Corporate Buy-In

It's no secret that fear is a strong motivator (or de-motivator). In 2005, a survey of senior marketers indicated that “fear of losing control of the company message” and “worries about what employees would write” were two of the most-often cited reasons that companies had not launched a blogging initiative.

These fears do have some foundation. Google, Delta Airlines, Microsoft, and a handful of other companies have indeed fired irresponsible bloggers who had posted information that was confidential or proved embarrassing to the organizations they worked for. Of course, these few high-profile cases stand in stark contrast to the millions of bloggers who post regularly about employer-related issues without compromising the companies they work for.

There are risks, no doubt about it, yet based on the statistics and our personal experience, we know that these risks can be largely mitigated through clear policies and diligent monitoring and feedback.

It's not unlike commercial jet travel. Strapping yourself into an aluminum tube and then letting the ignition of flammable gases propel you six miles up into the air could also sound a bit risky to the uninitiated. Combine that with the hope that the tube finds and gently descends to a perfect alignment on a narrow strip of pavement thousands of miles away, and it all sounds pretty crazy.

It's counterintuitive, but thanks to careful planning and engineering, flying is one of the safest things you can do. So is blogging—if you have the right people and the right game plan. The challenge is getting the fearful to understand so the process can begin.

Here are a couple tips that will assist you in your efforts to promote greater understanding of the safety and benefits of blogging.

BLOGOSPHERE DEFINITION

Dooce (*v.*) — To lose your job because of your blog.

The term was coined after blogger Heather Armstrong, whose blog is called Dooce (www.dooce.com/), was fired in 2002 for her postings about her coworkers. Since then, others have been fired, including a Google employee and a flight attendant. In those cases, the blogger blogged what they shouldn't have, forgetting that the rules in the workplace are more rigid than the blogosphere.

Get a Champion

If you research the stories and case studies surrounding the initiation of blogs in various businesses, you'll discover that often a lone senior executive was the driver behind getting a blog launched. In Boeing's case, the driver was Randy Baseler, vice president of marketing for Boeing Commercial Airplanes. For Stonyfield Farms, it was CEO Gary Hirshberg.

Consider targeting executives that have a leaning toward “guerrilla marketing” strategies. We've discovered that those who pursue word-of-mouth and other grassroots methods of creative promotion are more inclined to embrace blogging. Print or email the many articles in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, and *The Financial Times* that reinforce blogs as an effective and inexpensive promotional platform. Google your competitors that are blogging, and show how they're using blogs and where they place in search results.

One persuasive approach is to compare traffic trends of traditional sites versus their blog counterparts. Using Alexa charts to depict traffic patterns of sites your potential champion is familiar with, you can demonstrate how quickly blog traffic can match or eclipse their old-school equivalents.

Even when you have an influential champion working the problem, you can still expect some resistance. Christine Halvorson, Chief Blogger for Stonyfield Farms (The Bovine Bugle blog, shown in **Figure 3.3**), said at a blogging conference in 2005 that it was no slam-dunk for CEO Hirshberg to institute blogging. He had to convince reluctant marketing and PR teams that blogging was a good idea and it was going to be worth the company's effort. As it turns out, Hirshberg was right. Stonyfield's sales increased 25 percent over the last year, and has 750,000 subscribers to their "Moos Letters," a newsletter subscription service offered on their blogs.

Figure 3.3

Stonyfield's The Bovine Bugle blog (www.stonyfield.com/weblog/BovineBugle) offers updates from their organic dairy farm in Franklin, Vermont. Past posts include weather reports, factoids about the cows, and birth announcements.



Simple Sells

Management guru Peter Drucker once said “effective innovations start small,” and we think corporate blogs are a classic example of an advancement that fits this profile. Starting with a less-ambitious project is not only easier; it’s also more likely to be approved.

The general rule is that once an organization starts a simple blogging effort and they begin to see the rewards, they're inclined to expand the program. This has been our anecdotal experience, and one that is also backed up by other statistics. The 2005 Guidewire Group survey of corporate blogging asked 5000 readers of *CMO Magazine* to respond to questions about their blogging activities. According to Guidewire: "No respondent reported launching a blog initiative that was found to be unsuccessful" and "No respondent plans to scale back or stop activity."

More proof of this comes from Stonyfield's Halvorson when she discussed the results of their initial blogging efforts with *BusinessWeek* for their May 2, 2005 story, "Stonyfield Farm's Blog Culture." The marketing and PR people "didn't know what a blog was," she says. "They were wary about what I was going to be saying that wasn't in their control. That was a year and a half ago."

Later in the year, Christine was on a blogging for business panel at the BlogHer 2005 conference and told the audience that "I was at a brainstorming meeting with these folks last week, where we plan what we're doing for the next year. By the end of the day, if I had a dime for every time I heard 'well, we oughta start a blog about that.' I'd be a rich woman. They all get it now."

With this in mind, consider what we advocated in Chapter 2, "Determining Your Focus." Propose a small, low-risk "starter" blog. If you can launch a blog that wins approval and then document the results, you stand a good chance of eventually expanding the project into something more comprehensive. Boeing launched another blog, and plans to launch more, because of the success of Randy's Journal.

To figure out how much time, energy, and money will be required to launch and maintain various blog strategies, you're going to need to do your homework. If you've got a good picture of what's going to be required and how the project can expand, you will be more likely to receive company resources. You'll also be able to better allocate those resources when you do get them.

In the next chapter, we'll help you understand what blog features are optimal for your mission, so that you can ultimately design a blog that fits your needs and budget.

