

How to Blog for Your Business

By ROBERT MCGARVEY

Nov/Dec. 2011



Call this the era of personal expression. And indeed, the numbers dazzle: Facebook claims 600 million users. Twitter is catching up. And blog hosts, from Blogspot to Tumblr, publish millions of posts every day. The headline here: The corporate C-suite suddenly is climbing aboard, as more CEOs join in this rush to make themselves heard.

“We are in a content economy. You succeed by creating your own story and by creating content others want to consume,” says David Balter, CEO of BzzAgent, a Boston-based social media marketing company.

Blogging is a way to give personality to an otherwise possibly faceless entity, and CEOs are very much included.

“Every CEO should blog, Tweet, use Facebook,” says Bill George, former CEO at Medtronic and now a professor at Harvard Business School as well as a best-selling author (*True North : Discover Your Authentic Leadership*). “Who is the real person? People want to know their leaders. What are you feeling? Show your heart, your guts,” says George, who personally spends “an hour or two a day” on social media. (He blogs at billgeorge.org/blog/.)

Nobody has an exact count of how many CEOs blog, but the one certainty is that the number grows daily. For good reason. “CEOs should blog,” says Rosanna Fiske, CEO of the Public Relations Society of America (who blogs at prsay.prsa.org). “Blogging conveys a point of view. It showcases who the person is, what they are made of.”

Quantifying the exact business benefits of CEO blogging also is slippery, but those who do it have no doubt about the payoffs. “Blogging—and I have done it for six years—is an absolute enhancement to the business,” says Nicolas Boillot, CEO of Newton, Mass.–based integrated marketing agency HB. “As the business has grown, I have had more trouble staying connected with the people in my company and with those with whom we work. The blog helps me stay connected. It helps people understand me as a leader. It’s well worth the time I invest,” says Boillot (who blogs at hartboillot.com/blog/).

But know this: Different approaches suit different CEOs; social media are not “one size fits all.” And an awful lot of CEO blogs are plain awful—repurposed marketing materials that fall very flat and get read by few (or no one).

Some CEOs find blogging works for them, though, and that's because they've found their own style.

In Your Face

Kevin Roberts

CEO Worldwide, Saatchi & Saatchi

krconnect.blogspot.com

“A long time ago I came to the view that the further up a company you go, the stupider you are. You become out of touch. You start believing your own hype. You are swimming with sharks, and the water is turning red,” says Kevin Roberts, CEO Worldwide of Saatchi & Saatchi, a leading global ad agency with operations in 80 countries.

“Now the world wants to have a conversation with you. If you don't take advantage of that, you are a fool,” says Roberts, who says he has been blogging “for four or five years” and posts “just about daily.”

“I want to invite people into my own life. I blog about what I am passionate about. I blog about my kids, sustainability, soccer. Conversations work when you touch a nerve.”

Roberts stresses: “I don't use the blog to talk about business. Saatchi & Saatchi has its own blog. My blog isn't part of a marketing plan.”

Recently, for instance, Roberts blogged about “the world's greatest footballer, Leo Messi,” and a touching, eloquent apology Messi wrote—or did not write (he denied authorship after the apology became front page news)—to the Argentine people about why he plays in Spain, not in his homeland. This is big stuff—touchy to football fans and Argentineans, but for the rest of us there are buttons that get pushed about celebrities and what they “owe” their fans, and Roberts waded into all the issues in his blog.

“I don't pass the blog through legal before I post. I don't pass it through anybody,” says Roberts. “And I don't edit. I think of myself as a maverick and a vagabond Argentinean. I just riff. I open it up and let it go. The blog is really honest.”

You don't care about Messi or soccer? No worries. Roberts, in the course of a month, will probably blog on a couple dozen wholly different topics. “It's my life, not yours. Many people tell me they like two out of five. That's okay. The point of the exercise is to connect.”

Blasting Out Public Issues

Lou Provenzano

CEO, Language Line Services

louisprovenzano.com and huffingtonpost.com/louis-provenzano

As Lou Provenzano thumbs through a newspaper, he knows his next blog topic is likely just a page away. That is because this CEO of Language Line Services, the largest over-the-phone interpretation company in the world, knows that he very shortly will happen upon grist for his cyber mill. Provenzano thrives on issues—the grittier the better—and he strictly sticks to language-related topics. But with those, he relishes the controversy.

When a Chinese speaker's children are taken away from her in Georgia—in court proceedings she apparently did not comprehend—Provenzano is there with a pointed blog. When several states moved to make driver's tests available only in English, Provenzano fired up a blog.

"I got into blogging three years ago because I thought this was a way to get important messages out on issues I feel passionate about," says Provenzano.

"I try to get one big blog out every week," he adds. Readership includes employees—"I believe just about all our 5,000 employees read my blog"—and a range of influencers ("I know I am read by many state attorneys general").

He notes: "I blog because I want to have a serious discussion about serious issues. And I get a significant amount of pleasure out of doing this."

Lately, admits Provenzano, he also has been Tweeting as often as seven times daily, but those are quick bursts, fast thoughts. "I use otherwise unproductive time, such as waiting for luggage in an airport. With my phone, I can get off a fast thought that might lead to debate," he says.

"I like talking about these issues."

Drink Up

Greg Koch

CEO, Stone Brewing Co.

stonebrew.com/vblog/

Now for something completely different, there is Greg Koch, CEO of Stone Brewing Co., one of the nation's largest craft breweries. Koch occasionally blogs in the conventional sense, but that has not proved to be his medium. What has is video, and the man has—in the course of a half dozen years—emerged as a prolific video blogger. He guesses he has done 300. Turn a camera on him, and off he goes, talking about anything from devastating fires in San Diego to hot peppers in beer. Just about no topic is off-limits for Koch, who says there often is no—or at most, minimal—editing of his v-blogs before they are posted, typically on YouTube, where he has developed a substantial following.

"I posted my first video blog in January 2005. I just was so excited about the new brewery/restaurant we were building in San Diego. I picked up the videocamera, and next thing I knew, I had a video blog"

"Rarely do I do more than one take, and when I v-blog, I am the cameraman, the boom operator and the talent. It's just me," says Koch. "I got into this not because I was a video enthusiast—I really wasn't—but because there were things I wanted to share, and this lets me do so."

He adds: "I started Stone Brewing because I am a beer geek, and when you are a beer geek, you love sharing your passion. Gaining more sales definitely is not why I video blog. We make sales on the back of our beer, not on my videos."

How to Blog Tip: What Not to Do

Just don't blog at all if you cannot be authentic, says Huma Gruaz, CEO of Alpaytac, a public relations firm in Chicago. The core of her advice: To succeed, a C-suite blog or Twitter stream has to reflect the

true thinking, beliefs and personality of the author. “The feelings have to really be you,” says Gruaz, who blogs at <http://www.alpaytac.com/blog.html>.

“If it reads like a press release, people will tune it out,” warns Marc Hausman, the CEO of Strategic Communications Group in Silver Spring, Md. Hausman personally blogs as “The Strategic Guy” at strategiccuy.blogspot.com/.

Rosanna Fiske, CEO of the Public Relations Society of America, elaborates that, of course, some C-suite execs will want to bring in ghosts to fine-tune the writing, but “at the end of the day it is your name on the piece. CEOs who don’t get this right aren’t expressing their voice.”

How to Blog Tip: In Retirement

It makes perfect sense: What better occupation for a retired C-suiter than blogging? At least that is what Bob Herbold, the retired COO of Microsoft, is doing. At 69 years of age, he says, “I’ve been blogging for nine months” (bobherbold.com/blog). “I give tips on leadership. It’s really fun, and it is 100 percent my own writing.

“I want this to be in my voice. I do it because I have something to say.”

Herbold does not shy away from controversy; in one post, for example, he denounces teamwork. “It’s the enemy of creativity. If you want innovation, you don’t want consensus. Consensus is devastating in its effect on innovation.”

Don’t agree? Weigh in with your comments. “I get a lot of interesting comments on my blog—that’s part of the fun.”

Robert McGarvey covers business, technology and travel for outlets ranging from The New York Times to the Harvard Business Review.