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Blogs and Beyond:

About ACCbriefs:
Designed for cable communicators who work in public relations, marketing communications, public affairs, government relations, executive office and other staff positions, this issue provides an introduction and overview to one of the most recent communications mediums – blogs. Although a majority of individuals are not bloggers, individuals who do blog can have a significant influence on customer and public opinions. This is a strong reason for communicators working in the cable industry to have an understanding and awareness of the potential power of the blogosphere.

A guide to understanding and engaging consumer-generated media outlets

General Motors executives thought they had an interactive, online marketing campaign that would be a hands-down winner to promote the company's redesigned Chevrolet Tahoe in early 2006.

The company launched its "Make Your Own Tahoe Ad" contest, using a microsite and GM-supplied video and sound clips for users to put their creative energies to work. The four-week campaign drew considerable attention, with more than 30,000 people dialing in to create Tahoe ads.[1]

Unfortunately for GM, online activists were some of the most visible campaign participants. They created a host of parody ads that blamed the SUV line for global warming, degradation of the environment, the Iraq war and other problems. What's worse, the activists not only posted their ads to Chevy's microsite; they shared them among dozens of blogs and YouTube pages—generating regular views from thousands of visitors.[2]

Chevy Tahoe SUV God

Marketing experts have had a field day with GM's campaign, with some suggesting that it broke all the rules of online engagement and serves as a test case of how *not* to engage consumers online.[3] Specifically, observers say that GM should have done a better job of anticipating the backlash and taken more proactive steps to manage, if not control, it.

Such is the nature of today's Web 2.0 environment where today's consumers, tech-savvy or not, generate, share and comment upon any content they chose. From last week's family reunion to yesterday's customer service fiasco, nothing is off-limits—and virtually anything, even something seemingly innocuous, can erupt into a PR and marketing crisis.

The advent of this phenomenon, called consumer-generated media (CGM), which includes blogs, discussion groups, multi-media content-sharing sites and more, has created a potentially thorny challenge for today's PR and marketing professionals.

Chances are, when a blogger or content publisher talks about a company's brand, product or service, the commentary isn't positive. And, as the Tahoe example and others illustrate, a random CGM posting can quickly blossom and spill over into mainstream media and influence the search results that appear for brand name queries.

The lock maker Kryptonite knows this reality all too well. In September 2004, an online bicycling enthusiast claimed that he could pick his Kryptonite lock using a Bic pen.[4] It wasn't a new claim, given that a British cycling magazine had asserted the same problem in 1992. But that fact didn't surface or deter the rush of bloggers buzzing on this topic.[5] The "findings" were posted on a bike forum site; another online enthusiast created and posted a video showing how easy it was to pick a Kryptonite lock; and then came a firestorm.

In just 10 days, 1.8 million blog readers saw the story and a host of mainstream media outlets chimed in. In the end, the company exchanged 350,000 locks.[6] Estimated cost of this Web 2.0 disaster: $10 million[7] in 2004—a figure that doesn't account for the ongoing reputation and other costs, including litigation, that have followed in subsequent years (see graphic below).

"This phenomenon, called consumer-generated media (CGM), includes blogs, discussion groups, multi-media content-sharing sites and more."

Blogs and Other CGM Spaces: Why They Matter

It would be easy to conclude from the Tahoe and Kryptonite examples that blogs and other CGM spaces are consistent, go-to destinations for the millions of people who use the Internet every day.

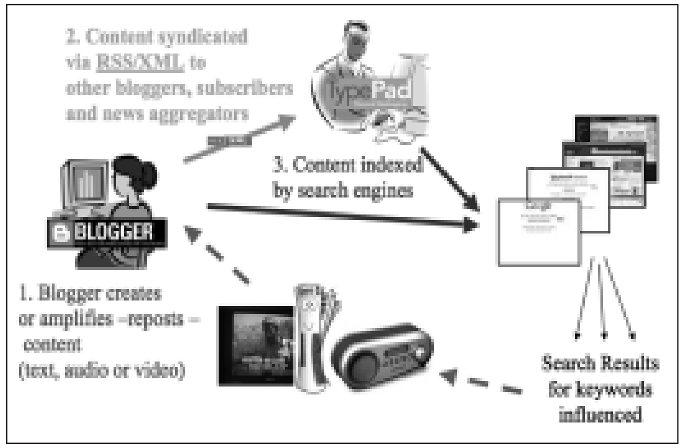
But Internet usage statistics tell a different, somewhat surprising tale: About 60 percent of Internet users *still do not know* what a blog is, and only 6 percent of Internet users regularly visit a blog.[8]

So what makes these CGM outlets so powerful? The answer: Their influence. While these online spaces may lack visibility, they have the potential to wield considerable *influence* both online and offline. As Glenn Reynolds, the author of the InstaPundit.com blog, writes, "Bloggers have very little power. What they have is influence."

This influence derives from what CGM and online media experts define as SWARM—or the syndication[9] and amplification of online content. SWARM works like compound interest on a loan, only the exponential growth in influence in the online landscape occurs much more quickly.

Here is a breakdown of this dynamic: A blogger creates or reposts content, using hyperlinks for attribution and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds to let other bloggers who subscribe to these feeds gain access to the original content through syndication. In turn, other bloggers and CGM pick up and repost this content and deploy their own hyperlinks and RSS feeds.

As this cycle continues, that initial piece of content generates dozens, if not hundreds, of links pointing to it.



In turn, search engines begin to pay attention. The reason: Links imply value for search engine spiders that crawl Web pages; the more links pointing in (LPI), the more validated, or influential, the content.

The result is a kind of snowball effect: As more bloggers and other CGM give play to similar content, the more frequently it will appear in search engine results. That is why, for example, that a Google search for "Chevy Tahoe" still yields highly ranked links to the YouTube-posted parody ads more than a year after they first appeared.

The SWARM dynamic becomes even more profound when one recognizes that as many as 98 percent of Internet users begin their online experiences with a search, with

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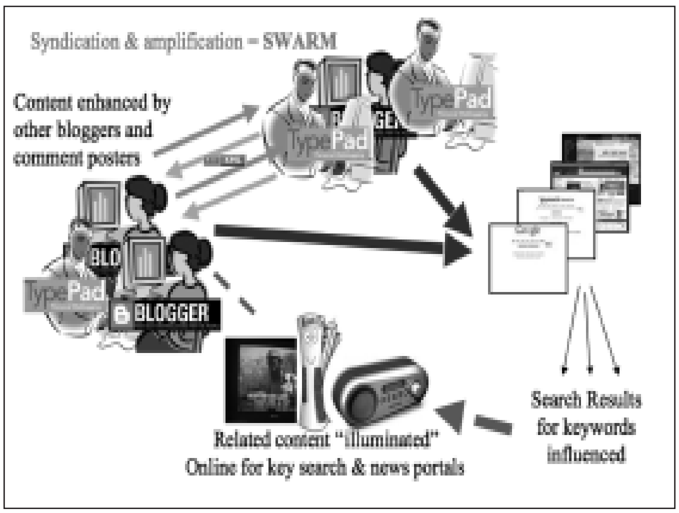
roughly 85 percent of those search inquiries occurring through just three main portals: Google, Yahoo or MSN search engines.[10]

Furthermore, a recent Northwestern University study shows that a growing number of mainstream media organizations are posting content that they glean from Google and Yahoo news feeds. Blogs and similar CGM influence these feeds, too, in much the same way as they shape search engine results. Most of these media sites (64 percent) provide RSS links to readers—a trend that further fuels the influence of CGM and associated content.[11]



"Simply put, bloggers 'light up' content in spaces (search results and "top news") where the majority of online people go," says Jay Byrne, president of v-Fluence Interactive Public Relations. "Their influence is derived only when enough of them work together using effective techniques[12] to affect these non-blogosphere spaces."

It's not difficult to see why the SWARM dynamic, when coupled with the indexing power of search engines and the manner in which most users access the Internet, drive the influence of CGM spaces such as blogs.

CGM Influence: A Litmus Test for Engagement

The prospect of CGM influence can be daunting and potentially damaging to a company or brand—a reality that begs the question, what are today's PR and marketing professionals doing about it?

The answer, according to industry studies, is not much. As many as 70 percent of PR professionals in corporate America do not monitor blogs and CGM spaces for discussions about their companies and brands, according to a February 2007 study by Kent State University/BurellesLuce. And, of the 19 percent of PR professionals who *do* monitor Web 2.0 spaces, about 72 percent say they lack a formalized process for doing so.

Some may find these statistics troubling, particularly given the fact that Technorati, a firm that monitors blog activity, reports that 23,000 new blogs get created everyday.[13]

Ironically, the PR professionals at Kryptonite fall among the minority of today's communicators who actively monitor Web 2.0 spaces.

In a December 2005 interview with the Intuitive Life Business Blog, Kryptonite's top PR Manager Donna Tocci said that the company was aware of the lock problem and its appearance on the bike forum and related spaces. The company "took this very seriously from day one. Contrary to popular belief, the media attention didn't make us take notice of this situation; we were already well into creating a plan by the time the traditional media were publishing their stories," Tocci says.[14]

So why not engage the brewing online crisis? Tocci said that the company focused the bulk of its crisis

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management attention on mainstream media outlets to discuss and detail their lock exchange program. In hindsight, she still defends that the company's course was directionally correct. "The majority of the people who participated in our lock exchange program heard about it from traditional media sources. That kind of proves that you have every right to be a little skeptical" about whether to directly engage blogs and other CGM outlets. (Note: Kryptonite's skepticism about active blog engagement has tempered since this interview. In April 2007, the company and Tocci launched "Unbreakable Bonds," Kryptonite's official corporate blog.[15] More on that coming up.)

Critics of Kryptonite's response, or non-response, say that the company should have been more proactive about responding to the video posting and detailing its lock exchange program in the forums and blogs where the issue initially surfaced. Tocci conceded the point but said that some of the delay resulted from a need to ensure the "back-end" of the exchange program was ready to handle the imminent influx of exchange requests to avoid a second PR crisis due to poor execution of the program.

Kryptonite's experience has led many PR and marketing professionals to at least acknowledge that the Internet and these influential CGM spaces truly matter and ignoring them is no longer an option. **The example also offers two key lessons that can help you begin your journey of understanding and engaging CGM:**

1. Given the SWARM dynamic, and the rising number of blogs and other CGM and the potential influence they carry, it's essential that any company or brand develop a system for monitoring what consumers and content generators in these spaces are saying and evaluating that content for its ability to influence search, news aggregators and other places where consumers and opinion leaders go online.

Highly effective monitoring programs flow from a solid understanding of the most visible and influential Web pages that appear when the public searches for terms related to you (brand), your products (i.e., cable) and related issues (i.e., Net Neutrality). By understanding *how* these searches occur and the results they produce, you can then parse out which blogs and other CGM are relevant and/or influential.

It's important to note that this understanding of CGM relevance and influence cannot occur without research and analysis into the language that consumers use in their searches, which can be gleaned from the various search engines and tracking services. This critical step ensures that a monitoring program goes beyond familiar terms and the language that companies use to describe their products and brands and encompasses, or at least addresses, negative or "off-brand" language that may

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be most commonly searched and used online.

The alternative to this language research and influence-based approach to monitoring is what's known as simple "buzz" monitoring; however, this effort provides partial, and sometimes misleading, information.

Once you've established which CGM are relevant and influential, it is then essential to monitor these spaces as they often provide the early warning signs of what's to hit mainstream media and/or the search landscape, as evidenced by Kryptonite and the Tahoe campaign.

2. Once a monitoring system is established, it's also necessary to implement a proactive protocol to guide when, where and how to respond to brand, product or issues-focused mentions that occur online. In today's online environment, there is no time to wait and see if negative, false or misleading content about your brand that appears in blogs or other CGM will bubble to the surface. Nor is that the best time to decide your policy on how to respond. In fact, such on-the-fly decisions will likely be a recipe for failure.

In viewing the Kryptonite example, some have concluded that the company did not have an effective protocol for knowing what to do with the intelligence that it gleaned from its monitoring efforts. The company consciously focused on traditional media and left the blogosphere to, well, the bloggers.

Here is an example of a four-stage protocol that v-Fluence uses and recommends for its clients when monitoring CGM spaces:

1. Commit to respond to, evaluate and correct the information about your brand, products or people if it is false, negative and damaging and it appears in a space that a company understands and recognizes as potentially influential and visible. The key take-away: Given SWARM and other dynamics, it's essential to stop such misleading information at its source to prevent future spread.

2. Evaluate misleading, negative and damaging information for visibility and potential influence. If the evaluation reveals immediate visibility, it's best to respond, either directly or via an appropriate third-party. If the visibility is lacking, assess its viral potential. Provocative and humorous comments often carry higher viral potential. If the evaluation shows minimal visibility, but reveals viral potential, it's worth engaging the source. If both visibility and viral potential are lacking, you should monitor for developments and heed any signs that more damage or greater influence may occur.

3. Use both risk communications and online participation best practices for response. Risk communications theory suggests that these communications could come from you or an appropriate third party, depending on which voice has a higher degree of credibility for the intended audience. Online communication best practices start with a required knowledge of the environment, relevant stakeholders, their tactics and acceptable practices for interaction.

4. Identify credible, supportive stakeholders (i.e., academics, trade association reps) to address issues-based mentions (i.e., those related to Net Neutrality) that appear in CGM spaces and warrant follow-up. Existing stakeholders in key online environments carry significantly more credibility than new voices; corporate voices are often discarded as self-serving or worse.

Active vs. Reactive CGM Engagement

"Active outreach to bloggers and other online publishers should follow a cardinal rule of media relations: Know thy pitch and to whom thou art pitching."

So far, we've discussed what might be deemed "reactive" engagement with CGM spaces. That is, monitoring these spaces and determining whether to respond if and when a company, brand, product or issues-based mention occurs.

But the realm of "active" CGM engagement encompasses two other areas that are becoming important for corporate PR and marketing professionals. The first form of active engagement addresses outreach to relevant blogs and CGM spaces to influence the relevant discussion and dialogue landscape. The second form of active engagement is direct participation, which sometimes takes the shape of "corporate blogging." This involves the development of a company-sponsored and identified blog where executives and other employees write about topics related to their business and, at times, personal experiences. Other forms of direct participation include setting up RSS feeds and syndicating Web site content, which makes it more blog-friendly.

Each of these forms of active CGM engagement is different and distinct in terms of the best practices that PR and marketing professionals should follow, as well as the pitfalls they pose.

Rules and Risks For Active Blog Outreach

Online PR expert and author Shel Holtz advises that active outreach to bloggers and other online publishers should follow a cardinal rule of media relations: Know thy pitch and to whom thou art pitching.[16]

The latter point is, perhaps, most important. Just as reactive CGM engagement requires a keen understanding of potential influence and visibility, so does its proactive counterpart. In its guidelines for blog outreach, Emergence Media suggests that corporate PR and marketing professionals get to know the A-list bloggers who are most visible and prevalent across relevant spaces online—and then go deeper to the mid- and lower-tier blogs that often influence the content that appears on A-list sites.[17]

Further, the Emergence Media blog warns that bloggers and other online publishers "are notorious for hating marketing/PR jargon," and they despise being treated like mainstream press. While Emergence says that bloggers appreciate solid, useful content that appeals to their interests, it advocates a more casual, conversational approach to sharing it. v-Fluence often counsels traditional practitioners to think of bloggers more like talk radio hosts than investigative journalists. You must first understand their motivations, style and ego before engaging them—preliminary steps that lead to more reliable expectations of the outcome.

Another essential rule of proactive blog outreach: Be transparent about your efforts, who's behind them and any relevant affiliation with a PR firm or client.

In 2006, Edelman Public Relations overlooked this important rule when it established a "flog," or stealth

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PR blog, on behalf of its client, Wal-Mart, to produce feel-good content about the company and its employees. The problem: Neither Edelman nor Wal-Mart disclosed their role in developing and funding the campaign. Once the truth came out, bloggers vilified the effort, trade and mainstream press picked up the story, and, rather than an image-boosting campaign, the enterprise became a black eye for both the agency and its client.

In light of the Edelman/Wal-Mart case, the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) issued best practice guidance for active blog engagement and outreach.

The WOMMA guidelines, which echo the call for transparency, begin with a kind of mantra for blog outreach efforts: "Consumers come first, honesty isn't optional, and deception is always exposed."[18]

Any less-than-transparent approaches to blog outreach, particularly when they seek to generate write-ups for products and services, also pose legal risks for PR and marketing professionals who choose this perilous path. In December 2006, the Federal Trade Commission issued a staff opinion that indicates that any pay-for-blog-placement relationships could be viewed as a deceptive trade practice if undisclosed.

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A final point about active engagement with blogs: Experts suggest that a thank-you and a little "link love" will go a long way when a blogger or other online publisher actually runs with a content or story idea. Experts recommend posting a link to the blog and its commentary (regardless of the nature of the review or reference) in a "blog mention" section of your corporate Web site.[20]

From there, best practices dictate ongoing dialogue to cultivate relationships with content publishers. "Relationships are difficult to keep, so don't waste it. Remember, you're in it for the long term."[21]

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Rules and Risks for Corporate Blogging

Should we start a corporate blog?

That's a question that's being asked with increasing frequency in many companies, large and small. Studies from Clickz.com, which monitors online trends, note that small businesses are more likely to use blogs to engage their customers than their larger counterparts. Why? The studies suggest that larger corporations are less familiar, and therefore, more pensive, about the role that corporate blogs can play.[22]

For example, a 2006 Clickz.com study notes that Fortune 1000 executives are unsure whether corporate blogs, i.e., those that target external audiences rather than internally focused blogs for employees, are an effective tool for communications, brand-building and/or sales lead generation tools.

But some online marketing and PR experts say that these concerns miss the real benefit that corporate blogs can offer. "The benefits of blogging for a business can significantly outweigh possible risks," notes the release that accompanies the 2006 Clickz study. "It can help put a human face on an impersonal entity, enhance customer relationships, and provide insights of the good, the bad and the ugly that can be addressed."[23]

Indeed, even Kryptonite, a company that many agree should have every reason to be fearful of this form of blog engagement, entered the corporate blog fray in April 2007, with its Unbreakable Bonds blog. In its initial post, PR Manager Donna Tocci said that the blog isn't about the company or its products. Rather, "this space is about people...People who have an unbreakable bond to something action sports related."[24]

Interestingly, the blogosphere welcomed Kryptonite with open arms, and early reviews of it are both positive and encouraging. Online guru Shel Israel says that the move is a smart one that better positions the company to engage customers and others who share its passion and enthusiasm for cycling and related sports.[25]

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Israel's comment hints at a larger and important point: You have to have something relevant to blog about—simplistic marketing messages to promote products in the blogosphere will drive more backlash than benefit. Many companies that have used corporate blogs to simply extend traditional marketing techniques have suffered broad corporate reputation challenges. Juicy Fruit gum, Hitachi and Boeing are among a list of companies that have been pilloried for leaping before looking into the blogosphere.

Beyond relevance, honesty and transparency should also be guiding principles for corporate blogs, just as they are for other forms of CMG engagement.

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CBS News learned this lesson in spring 2007. The network's news anchor Katie Couric's blog came under fire after it was disclosed that a video posted on the blog plagiarized a Wall Street Journal story. Subsequent discussion, and the inevitable SWARM dynamic that ensued, then revealed that Couric doesn't actually write her own blog, raising questions about credibility and trust, two characteristics that are essential for a top network anchor.[26]

Companies that opt to move forward with a corporate blog should develop guidelines to reduce legal risks and ensure consistent style in blog postings. Some examples from corporate blogging best practice guidelines:

- **Stress honesty and transparency.** What companies say about themselves in blogs equates to what they say in advertising and marketing materials. As such, misleading or deceptive statements about a company and its services should be prohibited.

- **Address confidential information.** In its corporate blogging policy, computer manufacturer Dell squarely notes that employees may not share information that the company deems confidential and proprietary.[27]

The same consideration should be given to information that the Securities and Exchange Commission would consider "forward-looking" and "non-public."

- **Give credit where it's due.** Copyright laws apply to corporate blog postings. If content's not original, the blog should note, and link to, its source. Such links make for good Netiquette and they can help enhance a blog's visibility.

- **Welcome reader comments.** Blogs can use designated areas for feedback or offer an e-mail address (admin@yourblog.com) for readers to share their thoughts. Editing comments can be a slippery slope, as blog discussions typically have a free-form caste. Your guidelines should stress that comments that are racist, vulgar, etc., will not be allowed.
At the same time, you should not preclude negative mentions about your company or services out of hand. These can add credibility when included on a corporate blog.

- **Keep content fresh.** Corporate bloggers should commit to at least a once-a-week posting schedule to ensure consistent, fresh and compelling content. Blog readers expect to see such content and, when they don't, they may never return.

A Quick Look at Guidelines to Address Employees Participation in CGM

"A growing number of companies are adopting guidelines to address employees who generate, comment on and participate in online content and related discussions via personal Web sites, blogs and other participatory spaces."

A growing number of companies are adopting guidelines to address employees who generate, comment on and participate in online content and related discussions via personal Web sites, blogs and other participatory spaces. The purpose: Ensure that employees, on their own time, do not disparage their employer or unwittingly publish content that may harm a company's competitive position, either through posting confidential information or revealing intellectual property.

These guidelines for employee online publishing must walk a fine line: Companies should support this form of self-expression while rightfully protecting their competitive interests. In addition, some companies choose to prohibit employees from mentioning their company affiliation in personal online publishing; others, meanwhile, allow the mention but require a disclaimer that clearly states any views expressed belong solely to the content publisher.

Additional suggestions for policies governing employee publishing on Web sites, blogs, forums and other CGM spaces:

• Limit personal use of the Internet, including accessing and managing personal Web sites and blogs, to breaks and personal time.

• Ensure that your online publishing activity does not interfere with your work commitments and is consistent with company policy regarding Internet use if done during break time or if using company equipment.

• Be aware of limits on your privacy. Employees have no right or expectation of privacy when using any company-owned computer, network or other equipment. In addition, the transparency of today's online environment effectively ensures someone can and will see your work.

• Remember that company policies, including the Code of Conduct & Ethics, No Harassment and Equal Employment Opportunity policies, still apply.

• Do not disclose the company's confidential and proprietary information.

• Do not use or mention any of your company's intellectual property, including any company trademarks, copyrights or other intellectual property.

• Be respectful and do not make statements that are defamatory; racially, sexually, or otherwise insensitive or offensive; or otherwise improper or likely to conflict with the interests of your company, its employees, members, partners, affiliates and others, including competitors.

• Speak with your supervisor if you have any questions about what is appropriate to include in a personal Web site or blog.

About the author:

Jay Byrne is president of v-Fluence Interactive Public Relations. Jay has over 20 years of experience in public relations, campaign communications and government affairs. His San Diego based firm, with offices around the country, utilizes public affairs and marketing experts to advise many of the world's leading corporations, non-profits and government organizations how to harness the powers of the Web. The firm's philosophy is to set the standard by which all others are judged in online communication and Internet marketing strategy.

Byrne has held senior communications positions at the White House, U.S. State Department, Monsanto Company and for the City of Boston. He has directed communications and media relations for various U.S. political campaigns, global activist campaign responses and other international public relations initiatives. Byrne's media relations and interactive campaigns have won numerous awards and recognitions including: B2B Magazine's top ten corporate web sites, Best Corporate Web Site from the Creativity in Public Relations Awards, and Reputation Management Magazine's "Netty" award for Best Public Affairs Web site.

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