

Blogs – The new community of interests

We have all heard of blogs – or web logs – by now but what exactly are they and how are they affecting the professions? Let Bruce Marcus and Bruce MacEwen be your guides through the world of blogging.



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and Bruce MacEwen

Technology in the 21st Century has a way of sneaking up on you. One day, email is a gimmick – an arcane toy for techies. The next day it's a vital communication lifeline. One day, cell phones and phoning by computer are toys for the high disposable income crowd and nerds. The next day, cell phones are as ubiquitous as key rings, and computer and cell phoning are seriously making land-line phones obsolete.

One day, the Speakers' Corner of Hyde Park in London is the capital of soapbox, with speakers who feel they have a burning message for the world, and causes to espouse, and ideas that come from every corner of the mind. On nice Sunday afternoons, it's the fountain of education in the human condition, from every political side to every religious concept. But now there is the blog – the personal web log – just a few

years ago a playground for teenage kids to express their angst, and for amateur pundits to express their personal ideas, and now a major factor in communicating serious ideas to serious people. In just a short while in the brief history of blogs, blogging has already made profound changes in politics and, ultimately, in other fields as well. Blogs are now institutionalised, an integral part of the communication matrix, and a major business and marketing tool. They are now, as well, a new phenomenon in the world of commerce, as advertising begins to creep in.

Easy to do, easy to set up, inexpensive, easy to post comments to and thoroughly intuitive for even the most technically challenged, it allows anybody with something to say, no matter how bright, no matter how clever, no matter how foolish or inane, to spread and share ideas and dictum to the world. The burgeoning of blogs is testimony to Esther Dyson's recent observation that internet growth is accelerated by the internet itself. Technology, she says, scales rapidly upward. And so it has with blogs. A blog is a different breed of communication beast, and a new species bred of the internet. Truly a marketplace of ideas like no other in history, and that's good. Now an American phenomena, they should rapidly spread throughout England and the Continent, as their value is recognised.

The power of blogs derives from their on-

line essence: available and update-able 24/7, with global reach, they are tailor-made for targeting narrow and usually passionate niche interests. They rapidly reach an audience of participants that would be completely impractical to reach in the off-line world, thereby constituting a collective intelligence of enormous professional value. An example is that of a CBS news *60 Minutes* item on President Bush's failure to report as required for National Guard duty during the Vietnam War; premised on documents allegedly from the period, which were exposed as false through blogs. A group of experts in the fontography of 1970s-era IBM Selectrics were spontaneously assembled within hours, and revealed the documents to be recent fabrications.

The distinctive 'comments' feature of blogs allows readers to contribute to the refinement of an idea, resulting in enhanced depth, enriched by multiple perspectives. This allows for a dialogue with readers, which means a new relationship between readers and writers. Blogs change and update instantly and, with built-in RSS functionality, readers can be informed automatically with news and information from other sources. RSS feeds are subscriptions to information, auto-generated by blogging software. They are a remarkable innovation, spawned by the success of the blog. RSS feeds allow readers to pull content directly

to them, in real time, as it is published from those sources. The sources, varying from traditional news sources to other blogs, are proliferating rapidly. They are the ultimate 'opt-in' medium, in which subscribers are volunteering to receive the content.

An outgrowth of web sites and online magazines, a blog can be trivial or profound, and because there is no professional editor, it can be excessive or outrageous. Or it can also be informative and useful. Simply put, a blog is a website, but with differences in format, as well as content.

Blogs emerged about 2002, but experienced explosive growth, starting in 2004. There are now an estimated 17 million blogs, mostly in America, but now emerging elsewhere in the world. Surveys show that more than one-third of Americans online have visited a blog, and one in six has contributed to a blog, including adding comments – a distinctive feature of blogs.

Significantly, in a survey in which more than 60,000 blog readers were asked to rate how well different media provided news and opinion, only 1% said the blogs were useless – but 50% said that blogs were extremely useful. That's a higher rating than for all other media. Blogs, according to the survey, outrank traditional media for credibility and usefulness, which may be a cause of declining newspaper circulation in the US.

For professional service firms, blogs constitute a robust, constantly renewed knowledge management resource, which in turn can drive business development by converting static resources to dynamic assets. Blogs are particularly growing among law firms (where they are called blawgs), although accounting firms in the United States are beginning to catch on. In the US, lawyers are less than 1% of the population, but they produce 6% of all US-based blogs. These blogs cover such subjects as the Supreme Court, law schools and legal scholarship, and bring astute observations on specific specialties – everything from US SEC regulations, to intellectual property, Supreme Court rulings, and practice management.

Legal blogs tend to be micro-focused, and law seems to be a strong, natural fit for the

blog medium, bringing together laymen and genuine experts. Short form blogs usually offer pith over depth, frequent publication over discrimination, and often say no more than "go read this!" Long-form blogs are usually more analytic and reflective, building on the content of the cited primary source. Ultimately, their popularity is driven not by the fact that they are hi-tech, but because they are appropriate tech.

Many legal blogs serve as clearinghouses for project management and as knowledge repositories. Information is automatically archived and searchable by category, and over time comes to constitute a large (and proprietary to your firm) knowledgebase available to all authorised readers 24/7.

The powerful tendency people have to learn from close associates in groups is served by informal organisational networks blogs provide – offering a most natural platform for creating and transmitting knowledge that help professionals become more skilled practitioners. In this context, blogs support communities of practice. The actual, functioning network that knowledge workers depend upon almost surely diverges from the formal hierarchy. For example, "I know you're working for Bill on this, but Sally knows everything about acquisition agreements. Ask Sally." While the best-intentioned efforts to get people to collaborate better along the lines of the hierarchy will fall often on deaf ears, blogs give people collaborative tools they will actually use.

A typical example of a popular US based legal blog is Adam Smith Esq (www.AdamSmithEsq.com), which was launched in January 2004. Its mission is to comprehensively explore the business side of large, sophisticated law firms, with topics including strategy, finance, globalisation, mergers and acquisitions, culture, partner compensation, etc. a surprisingly underserved target market, with a hungry audience. A new emerging vanguard in the blogosphere, Adam Smith Esq is a source of business analysis and commentary, on a par with the most authoritative mainstream venues, and with a focus and depth that is distinctive not only on-line, but off-line as well. Other blogs serving the legal profession include The Becker-Posner Blog, May It

Please the Court, Volokh Conspiracy, The Common Scold, Lawrence Lessig, How Appealing, and Bag & Baggage.¹

Blogs by individual lawyers and accountants within a firm extend the value of a firm web site by focusing on a specific practice, and updating it daily if needed. These highly focused blogs can be intensely informative about specific practices, often replacing traditional practice newsletters. And obviously, by demonstrating expertise, they serve as powerful marketing tools.

The key to the success of the blog is not just the ease with which anybody can do it, but the technology itself as well. The blogging software is readily and inexpensively available, and requires no great technical skill. Its factors such as the link and RSS, intrinsic to the internet, that give even the most elementary blog a level of depth and authority unmatched in the history of communication.

On the one hand, blogs are just another medium, a tool, a marketing and communications device. On the other hand blogs are the communication phenomenon of our era, with a prospective importance not yet fully recognised. Certainly, no such communications phenomenon has grown so quickly, nor promises so much in creating worldwide information-centric communities.

¹www.becker-posner-blog.com,
www.mayitpleasethecourt.com/journal.asp,
<http://volokh.com/>,
www.lessig.org/blog,
<http://legaffairs.org/howappealing>,
<http://blogs.law.com/commonscold/>,
<http://bgbg.blogspot.com/>,

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