

Blogs as Corporate Tools

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INTRODUCTION

According to *The Weblog Handbook* (Blood, 2003), Weblogs, or blogs as they are usually called, are online and interactive diaries, very similar to both link lists and online magazines. Up to now, the psychosocial literature on new technologies has studied primarily personal blogs, without giving too much interest to corporate blogs.

This article aims to fill such a gap, examining blogs as corporate tools.

Blogs are online diaries, where the blogger expresses himself herself, in an autoreferential format (Blood, 2003; Cortini, 2005), as the blogger would consider that only he or she deserves such attention. The writing is updated more than once a day, as the blogger needs to be constantly online and in constant contact with her audience.

Besides diaries, there are also notebooks, which are generally more reflexive in nature. There are long comments on what is reported, and there is equilibrium in the discourse between the self and the rest of the world out there, in the shape of external links, as was seen in the first American blogs, which featured an intense debate over the Iraq war (Jensen, 2003).

Finally, there are filters, which focus on external links. A blogger of a filter talks about himself or herself by talking about someone and something else and expresses himself or herself in an indirect way (Blood, 2003).

In addition, filters, which are less esthetic and more frequently updated than diary blogs or Web sites since they have a practical aim, are generally organized around a thematic focus, which represents the core of the virtual community by which the filter lives.

BACKGROUND

According to Blood (2003), blogs were born to facilitate Internet navigation and to allow the Internet to be more democratic. Anyone may post on a blog, without

permission and without knowing HTML Language, thanks to the first blogging pioneers, who built tools that allow anyone to create and maintain a blog. The most popular of these tools is the aptly named Blogger.com, which was launched in August 1999 by Williams, Bausch, and Hourihan and quickly became the largest and best-known of its kind, which allowed people to store blogs on their own servers, rather than on a remote base (Jensen, 2003). Considering this, it is easy to explain the passage from dozens of blogs in 1999 to the millions in existence today. In more specific terms, it seems that a new blog is created every seven seconds with 12,000 new blogs being added to the Internet each day (MacDougall, 2005).

From Corporate Web Sites to Corporate Blogs

Let us try to now understand the use that a corporation may make of a Weblog. First of all, we should say that corporate blogs are not the first interactive tools to be used by an organization; in fact, corporate Web sites have existed for a long time, and they were created to allow an organization to be accessible to consumers online, whether they wish to answer customers' requests or to sell their products. The hidden logic of a corporate Web site is to try to attract as big an audience as possible and to transform them from potential customers into real consumers.

Blogs, notebooks, and filters, besides being managed by individual and private people, may also be used by corporations, becoming specific organizational tools, which work in an opposite way to Web sites, being attractive by asking people to go elsewhere (Blood, 2003; Cass, 2004; McIntosh, 2005).

We may explain the success of corporate blogs making reference to an historical phenomenon: the fact that the in last decade of the 20th century increasing importance has been given to new technologies as corporate tools, and with this, organizations have had to deal with the problem of managing data and data mining. Weblogs may, on one hand, potentiate

organizational communication (both external and internal), and on the other hand be a powerful archive of organizational data (Facca & Lanzi, 2005; Todoroki, Konishi, & Inoue, 2006).

In addition, we should remember that a corporation may benefit from other blogs, searching for business news (Habermann, 2005a, 2005b; Smith, 2005) and market segmentation (Eirinaki & Vazirgiannis, 2003), doing e-recruitment and trying to monitor its image with specific stakeholders (Wilburn Church, 2006).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE: A CLASSIFICATION OF CORPORATE BLOGS

Blogs as External Marketing Tools

Blogs aimed at external stakeholders have very much changed the nature of the relationship between organizations and their stakeholders, representing a relational marketing tool. Before the rise of relational marketing, in fact, organizations used informative and cold strategies in their marketing mix tools. Nowadays, blogs collect virtual communities, namely clogs, so that an affective-normative influence is made, the typical social pressure exerted by someone who belongs to our ingroup. The idea is to create a deep link with the stakeholders, away from the vile aspect of money, products, and economic transactions.

Such an affective weapon works in different ways, depending on the kind of blog, if it takes the form of personal blogs, real diary blogs, notebooks, or filters.

Corporate Diary Blogs to Entertain Users

A corporate diary blog is edited by a corporation and assumes particular features. Since it is impossible for an organization to write in a diary in the first person, it is obliged to choose a spokesperson. Generally, this spokesperson is not a real person but rather a rhetorical invention, like Miss Y who writes the diary blog for the Lancia motor company or BB for Bacardi.

The narrative plot is generally simple, with rigid schemata, which recall in some way what happens in a reality show, where everything is on air and “real,” but at the same time previewed. The seriality of events is quite similar to that of a soap opera, where an affec-

tive focus attracts the audience. To recall the previous examples, in Lancia’s “Miss Y Diary” we follow the affective experiences of Miss Y, whose name recalls explicitly one of Lancia’s most popular cars: the Lancia Y. In Bacardi’s BBBlog, the narrator BB, whose name recalls both the first letter of Bacardi and Brigitte Bardot, otherwise known around the world as BB. Recalling Brigitte Bardot is a connotative device by which the blogger links himself or herself to Bardot’s world, a world of cultural and feminist revolution, where women enjoy a new affective freedom without sexual taboos. Likewise, in the BBBlog, we are invited to follow the experiences of the narrator, who provides us with a new cocktail recipe every day (obviously made with Bacardi) as if suggesting a new daily love potion.

In this kind of corporate blog, the strategy by which the corporation constructs itself as credible is affective (Cortini, 2005), trying to make the user identify with the narrator, who is always beautiful, sophisticated, and cool and who, above all, is able to show a series of characteristics that anybody may identify with. We may cite, for example, the game by which BB presents herself. She invites the audience to guess what kind of shoes she is wearing, and the users may choose from trainers, sandals, cowboy boots, or high-heeled shoes. In fact, the blog always replies that the user has guessed correctly, no matter which kind of shoes a potential user chooses. We may interpret this game as an effort to get the attention of the audience by saying that BB is very like the user.

Finally, corporate diary blogs generally do not allow users to interact; they are just beautiful windows (very esthetic in nature and for such a reason very seldom updated) dedicated to entertainment. The strategy used is that of pseudo personalization of the mass media (Gili, 2005), which consists in interacting with the audience not as a mass media audience, but rather a group of interpersonal interlocutors.

Corporate Notebooks

Corporate notebooks are “real” corporate communication tools. Instead of being entertained with the affective stories of a hero, we interact with someone real, a real spokesperson of a corporation, with a name and specific job skills.

If corporate diary blogs are designed to be attractive, corporate notebooks prefer to be pragmatic in

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