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The Business of Blogging

The Business of Blogging: Why you need a business blog, and how to get started

When it comes to communicating about your business with your key audiences, the chances are that you've worked hard to brand your company. You've built a website that is engaging. You've developed marketing material with the right messages and is on brand. And you've maybe even branched out into the world of social media, to tap into the wealth of information it opens up to you as well as the opportunities to deepen customer interaction with your brand.

Yes, these efforts are time consuming and resource hungry. Yet there's one more thing you can - and should - be doing to reach your current and potential customers on a deeper level. If you're already so busy, and the thought of adding one more on-going task to your to-do list makes you think of a four-letter word ... we hope you're thinking 'blog'.

The word itself can strike fear into the hearts of even the most driven business professionals. Perhaps when you think of bloggers, visions of 'techy-geeks' pass through your mind; banish them. Blogs have emerged as a legitimate way to communicate with your target markets, one that - when done properly - could pay you back through growth of your customer base, increased client loyalty and an increase in sales.

Why your business needs a blog

First known as web-logs when they emerged in the late 1990s, blogs, as they are known today, were initially personal, online diaries. The advent of free online blogging tools brought the ability to develop and maintain a blog to the mainstream; individuals with no HTML coding experience could easily write (or blog) about a topic. It was only a matter of time before business professionals and businesses themselves got into the mix, leading to a worldwide flood of blogs. Today the field of blogs totals more than 156-million worldwide, which includes both personal online diaries and business promotion topics covering everything from sewing to photography to marketing to product reviews.

But I have a website. Isn't that enough?

In a nutshell the answer is, no. Many websites are comprised of fairly static information - or content that rarely changes. Blogs however, enable you to



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provide timely articles, information and other media that are meaningful to your customers as they happen, or shortly after they occur. Though the content is updated regularly, it never goes away, but is simply archived and is searchable by your blog visitors. Over time, you create a storehouse of information, a resource your customers can visit time and again to get answers to their questions, find useful information and forge a connection with you, their trusted resource.

Experts say there are a number of reasons why you should get on the blogosphere bandwagon.¹

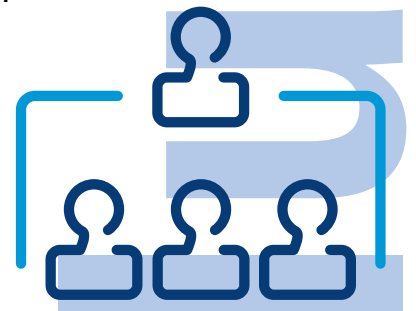


- **A blog can bring your target markets to your virtual doorstep.** Without an audience, you have no business. Creating a blog that connects with consumers on a meaningful level is the equivalent of foot-fall. You want it, and your business needs it. When your blog is effective it not only attracts this customer base, but also keeps them coming back for more.
- **A blog can create loyal customers.** The public depends on the internet for the information they need to make educated choices about how to spend their money on the goods and services they want or need. Your business can emerge as the one to trust for reputable, dependable, reliable information just by maintaining a blog. By educating your customers through your blog, and interacting with them, you show them that you understand and care about their needs. Such connections create loyal customers, and sometimes ambassadors. In addition, when you enable the public to comment on your blog, you create a conversation with them - one which gives you access to valuable information about what they like and don't like (even if it's unpleasant to hear, it's useful!) Or about gaps in your existing products or services. It's this information that can light the way for your future strategic business goals. While market research can be an expensive endeavour, blogs are relatively inexpensive, and you can use them much like market research tools, employing surveys and polls and gathering feedback. It's like having your own on-going focus group.
- **A blog maintains your customers' interest over the long term.** When you want to get the public's attention, you may choose to advertise. In the shorter term, that can generate sales, but the livelihood of your business depends on something with legs, something with staying

¹ Garrett, Chris. "13 Reasons Your Business Needs a Blog." Wordtracker. Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://www.wordtracker.com/academy/business-blogging-reasons>>.

power and enduring influence. Maintaining the attention of existing clients and potential customers requires a longer-range strategy. According to experts, blogs can hold the public interest over longer periods of time than advertising, marketing or promotional one-offs you might try to attract attention.

- **A blog can motivate your key audiences.** When you have a loyal audience, you can inspire them to take action, through your blog. Developing copy that has an impact is essential, but when you successfully do so, and include an appropriate call to action for your audience, you increase your chances of seeing real results.
- **A blog can improve your recruitment efforts.** Finding the right employee for the job and cultivating the industry contacts you need can be expensive and time consuming. Imagine if you could whittle down the number of applicants who throw their hat into the ring for every vacancy. Picture being able to pinpoint who is actually most interested in your business and most knowledgeable. Your blog audience can be a fertile field for job candidates who have the passion for the products or services you provide and the drive you most want in an employee. But beyond applicants, you can also use your blog to cultivate a list of networking contacts who are interested in your company and eager to learn more.
- **A blog allows you to respond quickly to public relations issues.** In today's 24/7 digital world, when everyone and their grandmother is following, liking, pinning, +1ing, retweeting and blogging, public relations issues can escalate from molehill to mountain, globally, in seconds. A swift response, from a real person is essential, so that you can manage communications crises before they become PR disasters that irreparably harm your company's image. Your blog allows you to respond without delay, presenting your side of any issue, reassuring readers that you are taking action and managing public negativity.
- **A blog with high quality content generates links.** Do you want to attract more people to your business? By creating quality content on your blog, you are positioning yourself as an expert in your field and attracting links from all over the internet. Many of these links will come from audiences you want to target: those who have an interest in what your business is offering. Imagine the possibilities: you could gain traffic from everywhere - from websites and social networks to discussion forums. From there, that traffic can



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be turned into leads with the opportunity to build new relationships and grow your business.

- **A blog is a search engine's best friend.** When consumers search for what you're selling, where does your business rank in the search engine results? If you're anywhere after page one, you've got a problem because, as research shows, most people won't read that far. You can improve your search engine results through a number of strategies, including developing linkable content through your blog. The more outside sources link to the information you provide, the better your search engine ranking. In addition, it's important to note that search engine 'spiders' (search) blogs more often than static websites, and as spiders find the new content you generate, over time, you will build up your blog's ranking points through the strategic use of keywords.
- **A blog helps you build trust.** Without trust, you won't make a sale. By positioning yourself as an industry expert, by offering reputable information online and encouraging discussion, you build trust and familiarity with your company. In time, this trust will enable you to make sales with greater ease.
- **A blog can build and support your company's brand.** The chances are that you've invested a lot of time and money in developing your business' brand. You'll know that it includes much more than your corporate colour palette and logo; that it encompasses the very essence of your company. Maintaining a blog and contributing content regularly allows you the opportunity to consistently employ language, tone and content that is 'on brand'. In addition, you need to seek and explore topics that allow you to share your vision and philosophy as a company. Over time, you will amass sufficient content to fully support your brand.
- **A blog enables you to build your own community.** When you engage in conversation with your blog audience, when you interact with them, you can help create a sense of community, a relationship greater than the one you might otherwise build through a passive, static website alone. That feeling can be carried from the virtual into the real world, creating real business building opportunities. When you establish a two-way conversation with your customers, you build a rapport that is valuable beyond measure.



- **A blog can improve your customer service.** Can you remember the last time that you needed customer service? Were you able to reach a real, live person on the phone? Did you get an automated mail-merged email response? Or, worse, did you get no response at all? Your blog offers your customers a connection to the source - and by being responsive and participating in the conversation, you can offer exemplary customer service. Blogs allow you to show off the human side of your business, and to communicate not only that you are accessible to your customer base, but also that you care about their experience with your product or service.
- **A blog can help you improve sales.** Generating new leads and improving repeat sales, in addition to building a better-informed customer base, are the end results of your blogging effort.

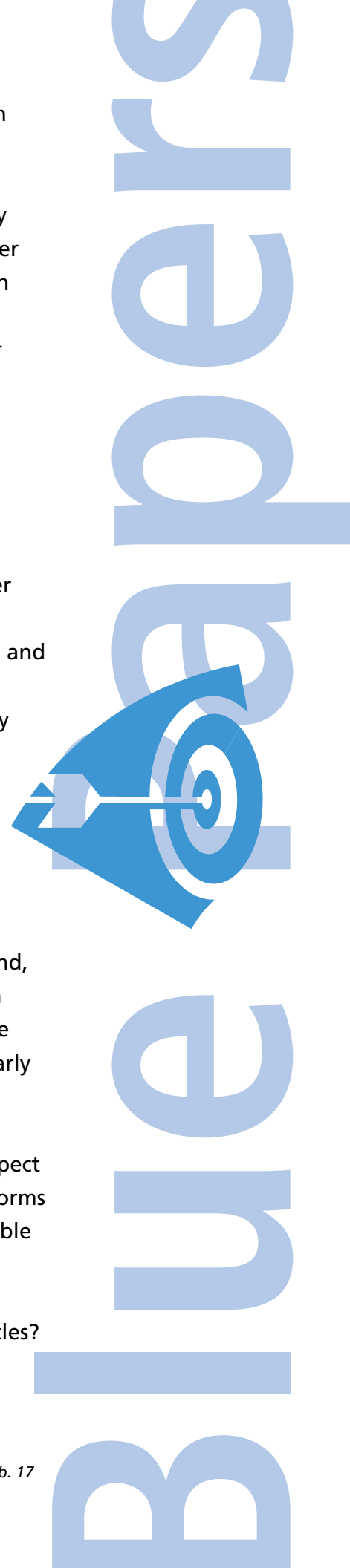
In other words, no matter what your business size or scope, no matter whether you are new to the industry or a well-regarded expert, a blog can help you achieve your strategic goals. Maybe you're chomping at the bit to get started, and you already have some ideas for the direction of your blog and topics you'd like to tackle. But hang on a minute ... it's important to first develop a strategy for the content you will be sharing with your audience.

Developing a content strategy

If you decide to make the leap into content marketing to build your business - as with any business venture - it's important to enter the new realm strategically. Plough in without clear direction and you could muddy your brand, or worse, cause damage to your reputation. Only by establishing a clear vision and goals can you truly capitalise on the potential inherent to blogging, hence the need for a content strategy. You must develop a content strategy that clearly identifies the needs of your target audience and the best ways to reach them.

And what's more, your customers don't just want content, they've come to expect it, and they want to be able to share it with their friends across multiple platforms - at the moment it gains their interest.² We've already established how reputable content fuels customer engagement. But how do you develop a strategy that makes the most of it? And, how can you incorporate social media in order to make it easy for visitors to share your wisdom with their own online social circles?

² Odden, Lee. "Why Your Business Needs a Content Marketing Strategy." *Content Marketing Strategy*. Web. 17 June 2013. < <http://www.toprankblog.com/2011/02/why-content-marketing-strategy/>>.



You can start by asking yourself a couple of key questions.³

- 1. What does your business stand for?** Having a clear vision of what your business is all about is essential to keeping your blog on brand. Knowing who you are as a company allows you to establish not only the words you will use, but also the tone of the blog and the scope of topics you write about. Think about your image and how you can best convey that through your blog. What words best define your business? If you are a fun, light-hearted company, you will want your blog to reflect that. If you are a serious-minded company, the language and tone will be entirely different. Be aware that going off brand has serious consequences, leading to confused and alienated customers. Define your brand and the tone you will carry throughout your blog, then stick to it.
- 2. Who are your customers and who do you want your customers to be?** You will want to take care to address and communicate with your customers using the language, topics and tone that they are most receptive and responsive to. For example, if you are selling trendy hair clips to school girls, your approach will be entirely different to if you are marketing to middle-aged married women. Likewise, if your current customer base consists mainly of pre-teens, but you want to branch into marketing to middle-aged married women, you'll need to strategically steer your blog to reach the audience you don't yet have.

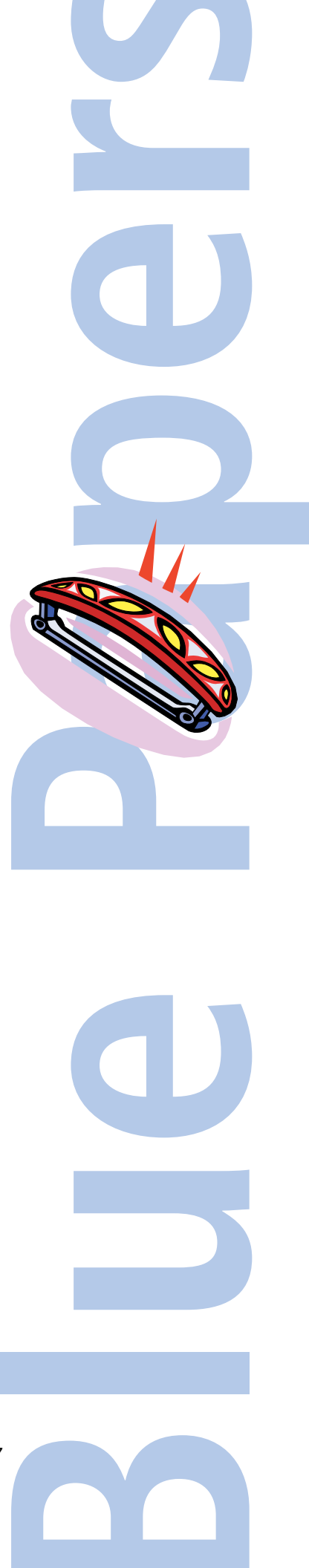
Should you encounter difficulty in answering these questions before you launch your content marketing strategy, you may want to call on the expertise of a content development consulting company that has a good track record in matching content to brands.

Take care to be a good steward of your resources before you start your blog. Any time and money you spend on content before you have a clearly defined strategy can be a business loss. But with the right focus, you will move forward with confidence in a direction that is both strategic and purposeful.

How often should I blog?

How often you add new content to your blog depends upon a number of factors. Consider your audience first: What kind of information are they looking for?

³ Hawkins, Kathryn. "Why Your Business Needs a Content Strategy." Hawkins Multimedia. 27 Jan. 2012. Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://hawkinsmultimedia.com/blog/post/why-your-business-needs-a-content-strategy>>.



Is it up-to-the minute industry information, or longer, more detailed product background? For an audience that requires timely information, you may want to blog on a daily basis, or even several times a day. For less engaged audiences, this could overwhelm and drive them away. If your audience is looking for longer pieces, blogging once a week may be sufficient. And while how often you blog is important, experts say bloggers should not only look at the frequency of blog posts, but the regularity with which you post them. Whether you post daily or weekly, your audience will come to expect that level of frequency, and you won't want to disappoint.⁴

It's also important to consider what you want to achieve from blogging and your end goals. If you want to drive massive amounts of traffic to your website, you will need to blog more often. If your goal is to reach a smaller, more targeted audience, frequency may not be as important as sharing highly relevant information at the right time.

You may find an editorial calendar a good way of staying on track. Mark up not only how often you will blog, but also the topics you will examine and keywords you will use for SEO purposes. If you also plan to include guest bloggers this type of calendar will enable you to monitor deadlines for their posts.

How long should my blog posts be?

For new bloggers, the ideal length of blog posts is a common, pressing question. Yet it differs, depending on how often you blog, the content you are sharing and who your audience is. Blogging experts say the key is quality, not quantity. Do what it takes to get your information across.

That said, as a general guideline: posts which are 300 or more words do the most for your SEO while longer posts, which retain their relevance, are also favoured by search engines. If you aim for 500-1000 words, you will have sufficient room to give your readers the information that they want or need, without overwhelming them. If you can't relay the information you want to share within 1000 words, consider breaking the topic up into several smaller posts.⁵

For longer posts, it is important to use clear formatting. Experts say this will



⁴ Stasiewski, Dan. "How Often Should You Blog to Increase Website Traffic and Leads?" Kuno Creative. Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://www.kunocreative.com/blog/bid/65967/How-Often-Should-You-Blog-to-Increase-Website-Traffic-and-Leads>>.

⁵ Candy, Annabel. "How Long Should My Blog Posts Be?" Blogging Tips and Blog Writing for Small Business Marketing. Web. 17 June 2013. <http://www.successfulblogging.com/blog-post-length>.

minimise the number of readers who skim your content, and will instead keep them engaged.

How do I build an editorial calendar?

An editorial calendar is a strategic approach to content development.⁶ To get started, think about a logical calendar for your business. Do you operate all year-round? You may want an annual calendar. Or if you are only open during the school year or during the summer - your calendar should reflect that.

Next, ask yourself, what are the seasonal considerations? Are sales tied to specific times of the year, weather conditions or other factors? Your editorial content can reflect those factors. For example, if you sell Hallowe'en-related items, you may want to blog about the hot new products being released well in advance of the Hallowe'en season. Outside of the season, you may want to talk about the products as they relate to use for other seasonal or event-driven needs, such as fancy dress parties, new film releases, birthday presents and other events. In addition, you will want to take into account marketing strategies and tactics that you are planning over the coming months and plan how your blog content can support those initiatives.

Finally, think about major content categories you would like to incorporate. Are there opportunities for recurring features? What topics and categories are not only timely considerations but will position you as a reliable source of information to your key audiences? Scatter these topics throughout your calendar.

As your blog is visible to all; it's fair to say you should treat it as you would any advert or Press Release. Let's say for example that you're releasing a new product. Your website might contain all of the information a customer needs to know to buy the product, but your blog serves a supporting role. You can post reviews or invite comments on the product, or include extensive information about the product to reach information-hungry consumers. You could also post articles related to the product you are selling, your business, hot industry topics or timely news and information. You could even share videos, provide how-to guides, client case studies and feedback. Then, make sure that you link this back to your website to drive traffic to it.



⁶ Cohen, Heidi. "How to Develop Your Editorial Calendar." Heidi Cohen - Actionable Marketing Expert. Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://heidicohen.com/editorial-calendar/>>.

As your blog develops, you will also want to link-back to previous articles that may be relevant and of interest to your audience. Have you ever been on a website with the intention of reading one particular article, and found yourself clicking through to several other related articles? Ideally, you want to create the same compelling reasons for your target audience to read further articles from the blog as they gain valuable information about the services you can provide to them.

Keeping to your editorial calendar will help keep your blog relevant. If you allow it to stagnate you will quickly lose your readership. In turn, you'll lose the benefits you initially sought by starting a blog. But if you are constantly sharing new and compelling information with your audience, they'll keep coming back for more. And if your content is relevant and of interest, they'll probably bring their friends. In the end, this boosts your search engine rankings and keeps traffic returning to your blog and (if it's housed there) to your website.

Choosing the right platform

So you've developed your blogging plan. You have an idea of the messaging you want to use, the audience you are trying to reach and some of the topics you'd like to tackle. Next you need a platform.

You'll want to start by working with your Web designer or Web hosting provider to see if you can install a blog on your existing website easily. Many companies are opting to use external services for their blogs, such as WordPress®, Typepad® or Blogger®.⁷ Bear in mind though that one of your goals is almost certainly to drive traffic to your website and the best way to do that is to have a blog that is hosted on your existing domain.

Searching for the right blogging platform can be overwhelming. There are so many to choose from, each with its own pros and cons. Some offer greater control, others feature more options. Some are free others come at a cost but with added benefits. Here are some of the options available to you.

Remember though that many other platforms exist (with new ones coming online all the time) and what is best for you is dependent upon your web experience, business goals, blogging vision and target audience.

A quick online search for 'best blog platform' throws up hundreds of results with



⁷ "Blog Or Go Bust: Why Your Small Business Needs A Blog." Forbes. Forbes Magazine, Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2011/06/14/blog-or-go-bust-why-your-small-business-needs-a-blog/>>.

many compiled lists mentioning the following platforms

- Blogger
- WordPress
- Tumblr
- LiveJournal
- TypePad
- Square Space
- Blog.com
- Jux.com

As you can see, the web is widely populated with blogging platforms. Choosing one on your own could be a difficult and time-consuming task. Luckily, marketing and blogging experts have recognised this issue and done some of the homework for you so that a few platforms clearly emerge as the most desirable for businesses.

What's most important when searching for a blogging platform is that you seek out capabilities and features that will serve you best. Here are some must-haves, according to experts:⁸

- The ability to secure your own domain name. When you blog on behalf of your business, you lose credibility if your blog address carries the blogging platform's URL. It is vital for search engine optimization (SEO) and just in case you decide to move to another blogging platform in the future.
- The capability to design your own template. Your business is unlike anyone else's and your blog should reflect that differentiation. Some blogging platforms offer limited control over the look and feel of your blog. Choose a platform that will allow you to have a custom template, designed to be in keeping with your organisation's branding.
- Plugins and support. When you want to add new features to your blog, you will also want technical support for those functions.



With these recommendations in mind, WordPress emerges as one of the platforms businesses commonly utilise, due to its wide breadth of offerings and capabilities. Blogger, owned by Google®, is also popular, particularly for beginning bloggers who may not have a programming background. Whether you choose either of

⁸ Brooks, Rich. "What's the Best Blog Platform?" *FastCompany.com*. Jan. 2011. Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://www.fastcompany.com/1714972/whats-the-best-blog-platform>>.

these options or another that is available to you, many platforms can be easy to use for anyone who knows how to use standard word processing programmes. Best of all, many basic platforms are available to use at no cost to you. Investing a bit of time into researching and testing the platforms that offer the most options you seek will pay dividends in the long run.

Make it stick

You've got the platform. You have your plan. You know the direction you want to take. Now the trick to getting your blog going and making it successful is to ensure that you attract and engage your visitors.

How do you do that?

First, it's important to remember that a blog is a small, yet integral part of your entire marketing strategy with the blog itself is an essential component of your social media strategy. When you keep this in perspective, it's easy to see how it's essential to share your blog updates across all social network platforms that your organisation uses. Simply put, this drives traffic to your blog, and offers the all-important bonus of allowing your audience to share the content easily within their social networks. In the end, this will drive the multitude to your virtual doorstep.⁹

Now that you have visitors, you want to keep them for as long as possible. You want them to keep coming back to your blog, have a look around other posts and areas of the website, engage in conversation with the rest of the community and contribute ideas. You want to make your blog 'sticky', writes Shane Snow, in 'Content Strategy: 7 Tips to Make Your Blog Stickier.'¹⁰ To do that, you can employ a number of tactics.

- 1. Mix stock and flow content.** Snow explains that 'stock content' is the stuff that offers greater insight, is written in a longer format and really engages your visitors. It is the stuff that really positions you as an expert in your field, and your business as the trusted expert in the industry. Meanwhile, 'flow content' is the quick-hitting stuff, perhaps excerpted from other content around the web that is related to your brand. With flow content, you contribute your own thoughts or

⁹ "Blog Or Go Bust: Why Your Small Business Needs A Blog." *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/work-in-progress/2011/06/14/blog-or-go-bust-why-your-small-business-needs-a-blog/>>.

¹⁰ Snow, Shane. "7 Tips to Make Your Blog Stickier." *Mashable*. Web. 17 June 2013. <<http://mashable.com/2011/09/16/blog-content-sticky/>>.



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commentary on the topic. This mix of content compels visitors to keep coming back.

- 2. Personalise.** Have you ever noticed how some websites seem to instinctively know what you need and like? Experts say smarter personalisation is the key to generating traffic and keeping your visitors coming back for more. For blogs, that means suggesting content that individual visitors are likely to want based on their past choices. Technology is catching up with the need for this capability. Snow says sites like Outbrain and SimpleReach offer some options. Some content management systems offer smart widgets with this capability, as well.
- 3. Encourage sharing.** You can do this through social media channels by asking your friends, fans and followers to share. Let them help you to find your audience. You can gain additional exposure by rewriting your posts to make them appropriate for sharing on Facebook®, Twitter®, LinkedIn® and other sites. You may also want to explore opportunities for sharing on related sites through syndication, a sure way to attract new audiences.
- 4. Develop a series.** If you want people to keep coming back for more, consider developing a series of posts on a related topic. Rather than writing a single, lengthy piece, break it up into smaller, more easily digestible chunks, and brand it as a series.
- 5. Solicit subscribers.** Capture those chance visitors by allowing them to subscribe to your blog by email. If your blog doesn't automatically distribute it for you, it only takes a few minutes to repackage what you've already written and email it out. If you can, place an email capture form on every page of your blog - if visitors like what they see, they just might subscribe.
- 6. Link to yourself.** As mentioned earlier, it's important to link from within. In every post, link to other posts. You can do so seamlessly by linking words or phrases in your body text to other related posts. This makes for a much smoother reading experience than writing phrases like, 'click here'.
- 7. Make suggestions.** When you recommend great content - whether within or outside of your blog - you position yourself as an authority. When you build trust by creating and suggesting content your



audience is interested in, they come to you when they need answers. In short, you have made yourself a resource.

The keys to success

Industry experts say successful blogs share a number of characteristics, which can be put to work for you. Consider these findings, developed by Hawkins Multimedia, a US based company that offers content strategy and development services and has compiled the following tips from that experience. With the right tool-kit and approach, you will increase your chances of building and retaining a vibrant, engaged audience for your blog.¹¹

- **Find your niche, and don't be overly personal.** Developing a personality for your blog is not the same as making it too personal. The best business blogs focus on targeted topics from a broad perspective, and stay clear of creating a personal journal. Instead of sharing your personal opinions, likes, wants and goals, share news and information that is helpful to your customers and what they want. Post tips related to your products or services, stories and discussion points that your target market will find useful. And try not to deviate from that focus.
- **Provide value.** By giving your customers useful advice and information, visitors to your blog will begin to view you as an expert in the field. Sometimes that might mean you're blogging to people within the same profession, offering them helpful hints. Positioning yourself as a thought leader can in turn lead to referrals from customers and colleagues.
- **Stay timely.** Follow the news in your industry. This can give you fresh topics to write about on a regular basis. Analyse the bigger implications for your business and industry, and invite commentary and speculation from readers. This not only shows that you have your finger on the pulse of emerging trends in your industry, but it could generate additional search engine traffic, when you use relevant keywords.
- **Post enduring content.** Blogs that are done well identify the frequently sought information in their industry, the stuff that surfaces time and again, and offer that information in a way that it will attract visitors. Think about the universal issues in your



¹¹ Hawkins, Kathryn. "5 Common Traits in Successful Business Blogs." Hawkins Multimedia. Feb. 2012. Web. 17 June 2013. < <http://hawkinsmultimedia.com/blog/post/5-common-traits-in-successful-business-blogs>>.

industry, do your homework and create a blog that can act as an authoritative resource for anyone with questions about that topic.

- **Get people talking.** The best blogs communicate with people, rather than talking at them. It is a chance to not only give and accept advice but also to actively seek it - and learn how to take criticism well and graciously.

Get writing!

That's enough about the nuts and bolts of starting a blog for your business; it's time to start building! By now, you know the reasons why you need a blog, you've identified who you are as a company, and what target audience you want to reach. Hopefully you've pinpointed topics of relevance. So now it's time to select your blogging platform, build your presence and start releasing relevant content to your audience. Entice them with timely information and tips that they can use, engage them through analytical thought and open conversation, and keep them coming back for more by keeping your blog up-to-date with fresh content. Use these tools to build your blog well, and your blog will return the favour, and build your business.



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