Corporate Group Blogging

Whitepaper

Building Business And Product Brands
Through Group Blogs and Blogging

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"Building Business And Product Brands Through Group Blogs and Blogging"

- More than a handful of the most respected business publications have ranked business blogging as the trend to watch in 2005.

- Companies with household names like Microsoft, General Motors, and Sun Microsystems have launched business blogs, and there is a race for mindshare with consumers and constituents.

- This whitepaper describes a subset of the corporate blogging space known as ***group blogging***. As opposed to individual blogs, corporate group blogs aggregate the writings of multiple employees of a company.

- Group blogging creates a powerful opportunity for a company to build its brand by binding individual bloggers together in a corporate umbrella.

- Group blogs can create top of mind awareness and demonstrate thought leadership on certain subjects while reducing the authoring requirements of each individual

- Group blogs capture information from real employees and experts and built tighter trust and ties with your constituents

- Group blogs can create context for readers beyond that

This whitepaper will describe how group blogs will continue to become more influential in the business community. This paper will also describe essential elements and pitfalls to group business blogging.

If You Miss The Trend On Business Blogging, You Will Regret It

The coming rage is ***business blogging*** – the use of blogs by professionals and corporations. Major publications can't get enough coverage of the subject. The *Harvard Business Review* highlights business blogging as a breakthrough for 2005.[1] *Fortune* magazine calls blogging the #1 business technology trend to watch in their article entitled, "Why There Is No Escaping the Blog"[2]. *BusinessWeek* covers blogging in its May 2, 2005 cover story "Blogs Will Change Your Business"[3].

The basic value proposition for using blogs in business is to create top of mind awareness and greater affinity with your customers and partners.

Business blogs represent an opportunity to strengthen your company's and products' brands. These are opportunities you shouldn't miss.

While some companies develop blogging relationships by allowing their employees to blog in loosely defined relationships with the company and using individual-oriented blogging software, there is a growing interest in using ***group blogs*** in business. As opposed to individual blogs, which are comprised of a single author, group blogs aggregate the writings and content generated by multiple authors. The interest in group blogs is growing as certain group blogs outrank individual blogs in popularity and affinity.

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[1] Source: "The HBR List: Breakthrough Ideas for 2005" at
http://harvardbusinessonline.hbsp.harvard.edu/b01/en/common/item_detail.jhtml?id=R0502A

[2] Source: "Why There's No Escaping the Blog" at
http://www.fortune.com/fortune/technology/articles/0,15114,1011763,00.html

This whitepaper helps to introduce group blogging to organizations. As part of this introduction, this paper will:

- highlight why and how corporate group blogging is important

- explore some sample group blogs used by organizations

- identify some essential elements and common pitfalls to group blogging

- outline how one might think about selecting a technology platform for group blogs

> *"Group blogs aggregate the writings and content generated by multiple Authors, as opposed to individual blogs, which are comprised of a single author."*

By better understanding the forces and concepts outlined above, one can make group blogging more successful than individual blogging (or at least complement individual blogging).

Let's have a closer look!

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[3] Source: "Blogs Will Change Your Business" at
http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_18/b3931001_mz001.htm

Corporate Blogs Can Create Top Of Mind Awareness And Build A Brand

Corporate blogs can be used for either internal or external purposes, as blogs are essentially a publishing and communications medium. Deutsche Bank (DB) recently published a research paper entitled, "Blogs: The new magic formula for corporate communications?"[4], containing a comprehensive chart on the deployment possibilities for corporations (see Figure 1).

Deployment possibilities for corporate blogs

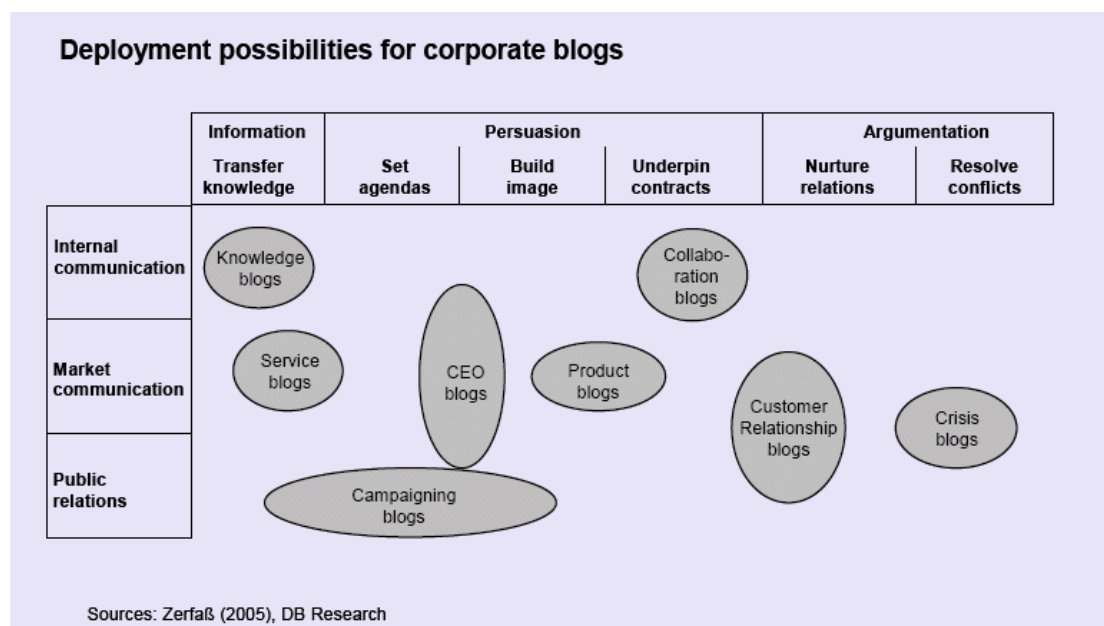|	Information	Persuasion			Argumentation	
	Transfer knowledge	Set agendas	Build image	Underpin contracts	Nurture relations	Resolve conflicts
Internal communication	Knowledge blogs			Collaboration blogs		
Market communication	Service blogs	CEO blogs	Product blogs	Customer Relationship blogs		Crisis blogs
Public relations		Campaigning blogs				

Sources: Zerfaß (2005), DB Research

Figure 1: Deutsche Bank Research On Deployment Uses Of Corporate Blogs

What is interesting to note about the way DB has depicted the use of blogs is that the medium permits a combination of information transfer, persuasion, and argumentation processes. Practically every company in the world has a need to establish a more personal relationship with customers, groups of customers, or the public. Blogs may be used to demonstrate a company's fields of expertise, overall competence, and enthusiasm.

Group Blogs Enable A Perfect Mixture Of Personal And Corporate Information And Dialogue

Corporate group blogs are a subset of the blog deployment cases depicted above in Figure 1. 21Publish believes group blogs have more potential than individual blogs as group blogs bind individual bloggers together in a corporate umbrella, portal, and *brand*. A properly managed corporate blog communicates lively, interesting and powerful messages.

The Coming of Group Business Blogs: The political blogosphere is one of the most organized subsegments of the blogosphere. If the steady-state of that ecosystem even remotely serves as an example of what will happen with corporate blogging, then Half Sigma[5] captures things very nicely as to how group blogs can be powerful:

> *Anyone familiar with the blogosphere must have observed that group blogs are disproportionately represented among the top blogs. If you find a blog that has zero inbound links and no readers, it is almost always a solo blog. But many of the top blogs are group blogs. In the top ten (according to the Ecosystem) we see that Daily Kos, Power Line, The Volokh Conspiracy and Boing Boing are all group blogs. A similarly high percentage of the top hundred blogs are group blogs.*

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[4] Source: "Blogs: The new magic formula for corporate communications?", Deutsche Bank Research, Economics, August 22, 2005, No. 53.
[5] Source: "Group blogs vs. solo blogs" at http://www.halfsigma.com/2005/06/group_blogs_vs_.html

Consider the [group blog from Mercury Interactive](#) (a NASDAQ Software 100 firm). On the one hand, the main page for the group blog has a consistent look with the [company's traditional website](#). The group blog also focuses on a special theme. In this case, it is thought leadership on information technology (IT) governance.

Figure 2: Mercury Interactive Group Blog (Main Page)

The main page of the group blog enables folks to get a snapshot of all of the thought leadership going on at Mercury Interactive in the way of recent post excerpts.

By virtue of being in a blogging environment (as compared to a static website), Mercury has the ability to engage prospects, customers, and other bloggers and media in dialogue through typical blog features such as linking, comments, and trackback. Through blogging, employees also help to influence search engine traffic to Mercury's overall website.

In a group blogging environment, every blogger may have their own blog which is tied up into a master group blog portal. Below is the blog by a specific employee, who focuses on IT governance as his area of expertise.

Figure 3: Employee Blog As Part of Corporate Group Blog

A key thing to note here is that the corporate group blog is a perfect mixture of individualized employee experiences and perspectives and business information (all of which help to build the brand). Note that each blogger has an ability to write in plain language, establish a unique voice, and benefit by being part of a larger group. By being in a larger group, readers can benefit by having more material to read if desired, and the writing requirements of each author goes down considerably when one is part of a group.

Another noteworthy case of group blogging is the effort by Hill & Knowlton, the leading international communications consultancy.
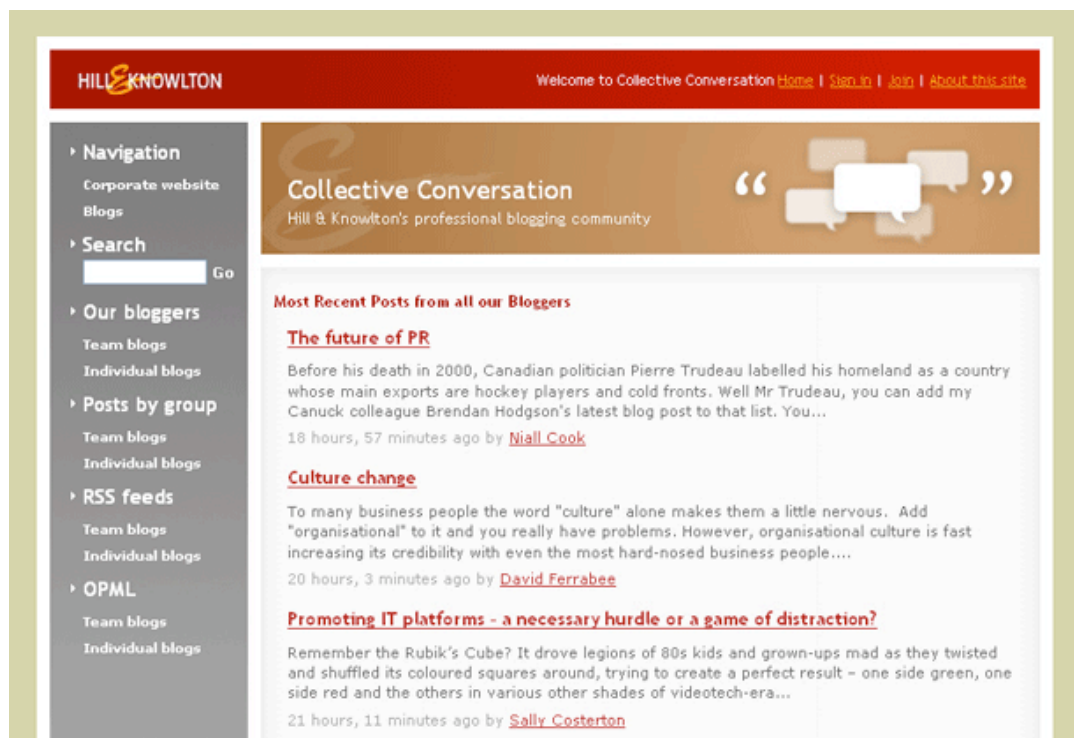

Figure 4: Hill & Knowlton's Group Blog

In a blog post[6] on August 9, 2005, Niall Cook indicated that "We officially announced our blogging community to all our 1500+ staff in 38 countries today … Every employee is being encouraged to complete a slightly tongue-in-cheek questionnaire, which provides them with an assessment of whether they have the desire or time to blog for our brand."

If a leading PR firm can marshal armies of people to help build their brand and to build top of mind awareness using blogs, it is something that every business should consider. Hill & Knowlton's use is a great example of "practicing what one preaches."

Thus, the value of group business blogs over individual blogs can be summarized as follows:

- group blogs capture information from real employees and experts and built tighter trust and ties with your constituents

- information on the various blogs making up the group blog is personalized not sanitized like traditional websites

- blogs provide a way to touch base regularly with customers, partners, and prospects

- group blogs can create top of mind awareness and demonstrate thought leadership on certain subjects while reducing the authoring requirements of each individual

[6] Source: "Hill & Knowlton gets blogging" at
http://blogs.hillandknowlton.com/blogs/niallcook/archive/2005/08/09/hill_and_knowlton_gets_blogging.aspx

Get Sensitized To The Essential Elements And Pitfalls To Corporate Group Blogs

There are some essential elements that one needs to work through to make a corporate group blog successful and more powerful than its individual parts. A traditional approach to looking at this problem might be to analyze the voices of the bloggers and the transparency with which they blog. While these types of considerations may be true for micro-level analysis, we'll first take a different approach here. For group blogs to be effective for a company, one needs to consider two things: 1) how the blog fits with the brand, and 2) how the blog helps build customer loyalty.

Using a customer loyalty orientation, 21Publish believes there are some of the essential elements of group blogs. A group blog should:

- **Occupy a setting and serve a goal that the business wants to achieve with its group blog** - Mercury developed a theme around its corporate governance expert zone. Microsoft has set its goals around communication with its developer community. Amnesty International uses its blogs to communicate with the public on human rights issues. Make the blog live up to the brand.

- **Aggregate and demonstrate depth and breadth of knowledge by employees and experts** – Customers develop tighter ties with a company when employees possess expert knowledge and when customers feel a personal connection with employees behind the brand and company.

- **Show consistency (yet be complementary) to other communication channels** – Blogs aren't the same as corporate websites. Blogs can be spontaneous, authentic, and more down to earth. A key success factor to increasing customer loyalty is to engage customers using multiple means (e.g., website, blogs, person-to-person calls), and each means should have a complementary feel.

- **Recognize the readers want to segment out information they want to read** – People are in information overload these days. The more easily people can get to the subset of information that they want (e.g., all posts by company, by specific author, by topic, by syndication feed), the better the customer experience will be.

- **Reach out to customer, readers, and the blogosphere** – These are blogging basics since blogging is a participative media and communication method. Group bloggers should be responsive to comments, criticisms, and discussions on the Internet wherever possible.

- **Try to be fluid and entrepreneurial in spirit** – Since blogging is dynamic and updated much more regularly than websites, it is a good idea to keep mixing things up a bit. Learn from mistakes. Learn from successes. Be creative. People like variety and fresh angles when reading blog posts much like people like to listen to dynamic as opposed to monotonous speakers.

In addition to the above points that address blogs in a larger context of the company brand, a company should also be aware of some micro-level issues that may kill a blogging effort:

- **Establish a group policy, but do not make it too strict** - If your company's blog policy is too strict, you may need to rethink things. As an example, if your company needs to run each blog post through a lawyer before it sees the light of day, group blogs may not be for your organization. According to Adam Sohn, product manager at Microsoft, Microsoft's unspoken blog policy is "Don't be stupid."[7] Such a policy enables Microsoft to be agile yet responsible. A good compilation of information on blog policies can be found at the Diva Marketing Blog.[8]

- **If bloggers lack (or lose) a real voice, the main benefit of blogs are diminished.** One main reason why people are fed up with websites and press releases are that they are full of corporate speak. Old media doesn't seem real anymore. Make sure that if you limit blogging to a few individuals, that they are the right people to blog with passion, without predjudice, and with authenticity.

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[7] Source "Blogging With The Boss's Blessing" at
http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_26/b3889107.htm
[8] Source: "Corporate Blogging Guidelines" at
http://bloombergmarketing.blogs.com/bloomberg_marketing/2005/03/thomas_nelson_p.html

- **If the blog is updated semi-annually, this may be too infrequent.** Building rapport with customers may be harder than maintaining relationships with your family. You need to communicate with you audience somewhat regularly. Authoring requirements on individuals are reduced dramatically when multiple authors are involved. This is a key benefit of group blogs.

- **Be careful getting wrapped around the axle though analyzing things too much.** A key to blogging is getting forward motion. Blogging is not that difficult, but it is a different mechanism than press releases, email, and brochure text. Come up with a plan to move forward. Start reading blogs. Ask friends or vendors for input. Try a pilot before going for the gusto. But take action!

How To Select A Core Solution For Group Blogs

The technology to support group blogging can be looked at a number of different ways, but based on experiences at 21Publish, when people look at blogging software for group blogging and branding applications, the following are high-runner areas of consideration:

1. **Hosted Versus Unhosted** – A hosted solution provides the quickest way to get up and running as no information technology staff or equipment are required, and there are no maintenance costs. Some studies have shown that two-thirds of a company's IT budget goes to maintenance. When looking at vendors that host blogging solutions, note that some may offer dedicated server solutions (e.g., if there are single sign-on requirements).

2. **Customizable Design**– A key to branding for companies is to make sure that the company preserves its look. Make sure that the vendor provides a blog solution where both look and feel and web domain address can be fully customized. In some cases, you may want to see if the blog solution can be extended (for new features you may want).

3. **Tailored Search Functions and Reader Views** – Some blogging platforms geared toward individuals have been extended to support multiple authors without making it easier for the reader to navigate the group of blogs. See if the platform you are considering can support branded search capabilities (e.g., non-generic Google searches) across all blogs or within blogs, views of all posts by all bloggers, views of all posts by a single blogger, views by categories, etc. If the vendor does not have these capabilities currently in a base solution, see if the

vendor can make such capabilities available via a product upgrade.

4. **Co-Authoring and Intranet & Review Capabilities** – Co-authoring refers to the ability to have different bloggers write for multiple blogs or for different categories. Some blog platforms permit draft posts to be reviewed before published to the public. Additionally, some platforms allow blog posts to be posted to an intranet for internal workflow.

5. **Blogosphere and Reader Interaction Support** – Since a key aspect to your group blogs may be to ensure that blog writers can interact with readers and the blogosphere, make sure that the platform supports options for commenting, emailing of blogs posts to other readers, rating of blog posts by readers, comment moderation, and things like trackbacks.

6. **Ease of Use and Scalablity** - This is a key argument for many companies. While some initial blogging deployments may only start with two to three employees, many companies want a solution to easily scale to hundreds or thousands of employees (and still make the process seamless and manageable).

Summary of Benefits of Group Blogs

Group blogs are something all corporations should consider as part of a strategy to evangelize and build their brand. Relationships with customers go deeper when companies engage customers through multiple means in a way that is consistent with the brand. Websites and press releases are only one way to engage constiuents. Blogs are another means to engage people, and a company can put real faces on the organization by having executive and trench-level workers blog.

So if this whitepaper has at all intrigued you, start to explore some vendors that can support you with your group blogging efforts. Get blogging now!

Some Recommended Business Blogs To Explore

Corporateblogging.info - http://www.corporateblogging.info

Evelyn Rodriguez - http://evelynrodriguez.typepad.com/crossroads_dispatches

GM Fastlane Blog - http://fastlane.gmblogs.com

Hill & Knowlton - http://blogs.hillandknowlton.com/blogs

Jonathan Schwartz - http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan/Weblog

Mercury Blogs - http://blogs.mercury.com

Robert Scoble - http://radio.weblogs.com/0001011

Steve Rubel - http://www.micropersuasion.com

About 21Publish

21Publish is a turnkey software solution for creating your own private label blog service.

The 21Publish solution has fully customizable templates to support your corporate design needs. It provides a centralized hub from which to build, manage, and deploy your group blogging service. As an on-demand solution you can easily scale the service according to your needs.

21Publish is located in the United States and Europe serving customers like Amnesty International, McGraw-Hill, and Mercury Interactive. 21Publish is a spin-off of 20six, Europe's leading blog service. 20six has established blogging communities in UK, Netherlands, Germany and France. 21Publish was founded by Stefan Wiskemann who also co-founded 20six and ricardo.de, the European Internet-Auction company that went public in 1999, before merging with QXL in Europe's biggest ecommerce merger.

Please visit 21Publish at **http://www.21publish.com**.