

(The Business Blogging Field Guide originally appeared in The Social Customer Manifesto, <http://www.socialcustomer.com>)

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 1: Intro

Think of this as our little, irreverent safari into the wilds of the blogosphere. An expedition to create an initial taxonomy of business blogger species, if you will.

There have been lots of folks who have done the "what is business blogging" thing. What we haven't seen, however, is a good description of the different ways that companies are using blogs at the point of interaction with the customer. There seem to be a few:

- The Tour Guide
- The Recommender
- The Maven
- The Customer Advocate
- The Do-er
- The CEO Blog

We'll take a look at each of these in more detail.

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 2: The Tour Guide

"Tour Guide" blogs are the ones that give a glimpse into the company. Not unlike an actual physical plant tour, this type of blog gives a "behind the scenes" glimpse into the goings-on of the corporate machinery. Sometimes they cover current events at the organization, introduce the reader to some of the members of the company, or highlight particular products or items of note. All this talk of transparency for the customer? Tour guide blogs are a start.

"Tour Guide" example



Blogger: Noah Acres
Role: Director of Sales and Marketing
Company: Bigha
Blog Location: <http://www.bigha.com/blog/index.php>

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 3: The Recommender

"Recommender" blogs (commonly known as "link blogs") are not designed to be a destination in and of themselves, but are instead a resource for readers of a particular business blogger. One can almost think of these types of blogs as reviews or, as the name suggests, recommendations of items that the blogger believes will be of interest to his or her readers. In contrast to almost all of the other types of business blogs, Recommender blogs oftentimes do not contain commentary on or visibility into the company for which the blogger works. Rather, the blogger becomes a resource for his or her readership and, as a side effect, brings more attention to the organization where the blogger is employed.

"Recommender" example #1



Blogger: Jeremy Zawodny

Role: Platform Engineering

Company: Yahoo!

Blog Location: <http://jeremy.zawodny.com/linkblog/>

"Recommender" example #2



Blogger: Robert Scoble

Role: Technical Evangelist

Company: Microsoft

Blog Location: <http://www.scobleizer.com/linkblog/>

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 4: The Maven

"Maven" blogs (the maven moniker shamelessly stolen from the Malcolm Gladwell book *The Tipping Point*) are business blogs that highlight an individual's expertise in a particular area.

Contrast these to the "Tour Guide" blogs mentioned earlier in this series. Where the tour guides are showing an inside view of the company, the mavens are putting their expertise out there for readers to discover. Want to know about the latest trends in PR? You'll likely trip across Johnnie Moore in short order. Want to know about collaboration? Ross Mayfield is your man.

The most interesting thing about the maven business bloggers is that, typically, the blogs are centered around a business area or concept, and are not focused on the blogger's employer or associated organization. Instead of being directly tied to the corporation, the blog is tied to the individual. The assumption is, if you are an expert in your field and provide a reason for readers to frequent your blog, then you will be "top of mind" when a particular reader is looking for someone to help him or her with a particular business need in a related area at some time in the future. Most of the examples of mavens shown here are in "services"-oriented fields – PR, marketing, consulting, etc. – areas where the individual's ability to contribute has a direct impact on the final result of an effort.

"Maven" example #1



Blogger: Carolyn Elefant
Area of Expertise: Solos and small law firms
Company: The Law Offices of Carolyn Elefant
Blog Location: <http://www.myshingle.com>

"Maven" example #2



Blogger: Ross Mayfield
Area of Expertise: Wikis and collaborative technologies
Company: SocialText
Blog Location: <http://ross.typepad.com>

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 5: The Customer Advocate

Continuing our series on customer relationships and business blogging, we're now to where the rubber meets the road. Today, we've a couple of particularly salient examples where business blogging engages directly with the customer in order to better drive the direction of the organization. Enter the "Customer Advocate" business blog.

Customer advocate blogs (or advocate-styled posts within a larger, more general blog) are those that expressly engage directly with the customer, solicit feedback, answer direct customer questions, and generally reach out and act as a bridge between customers, their concerns and suggestions, and the organization.

When done well, customer advocate blogs will communicate full-circle, and follow the following steps:

- 1) Engage the conversation** - Ensure that customers have a mechanism for providing feedback, suggestions, needs, wants, and the like.
- 2) Distill and group the feedback** - Many of the feedback items may be around similar topics. Group those together and handle them in aggregate.
- 3) Determine your own prioritization mechanism** - All feedback items are not the same. How will your organization decide which ones to address, and by when?
- 4) Report back** - Let the customers know what's going on. The customers took the time to share their thoughts...what is being done with them? This is the step that is often overlooked.
- 5) Get to closure** - When things are done, let customers know. Don't let the feedback mechanism be a black hole. If enough suggestions are submitted that don't seem to result in feedback or action, customers are going to stop participating the conversation.

"Customer Advocate" example



Blogger: John Dowdell

Role: Support

Company: Macromedia

Blog Location: <http://www.markme.com/jd/archives/006722.cfm>

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 6: The Do-er

Whereas the Maven business blogs typically are written at a high level, cover a broad industry, and oftentimes do not overly associate the business blogger with the organization they are with, the "Do-er" blogs dive to a deeper level. In some ways, these types of business blogs could be thought of as a more narrowcast version of the Maven blog, concentrating on a particular area of expertise within a particular organization.

A number of large organizations - Sun, HP, and others - allow (or even encourage) developers to write about their area of expertise. Sun, in fact, has dozens, and maybe even hundreds, of bloggers writing about different detailed aspects of the organization. Although in Sun's case, President Jonathan Schwartz has the largest number of hits on his blog (about 4,300 recent hits), the number of views by readers of the Sun Do-er blogs, in aggregate, outstrip his reach by at least 10:1. (And that's just looking down Sun's first 65 employee blogs.) HP is testing out this strategy as well, but to date has taken a more cautious stance, with only a handful of Do-er blogs.

It is extremely important to note, however, that Do-er blogs in particular are not restricted to the high-tech industry. In fact, some of the most interesting stories and insight from down in the trenches comes from areas outside of high-tech. There are a number of medical professionals who are blogging about detailed topics, as well as individuals from midsize and even small companies in areas such as automotive repair and home improvement.

"Do-er" example #1



Blogger: Bryan Cantrill (middle)
Role: Solaris Kernel Development
Company: Sun Microsystems
Blog Location: <http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/bmc/20050125>

"Do-er" example #2



Blogger: Archie Reed
Role: Secure Identity Management
Company: HP
Blog Location: <http://devresource.hp.com/blogs/reed/>

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 7: The CEO Blog

Ah, the CEO Blog. Such the conundrum. A great opportunity...here is a means for an organization's leader to connect and communicate directly with the market. At the same time, a great challenge...if done poorly, a CEO Blog can be worse than doing nothing. Such interesting times, no?

Although commonly called a "CEO Blog," the name itself is a bit of a misnomer. Although a CEO Blog is oftentimes written by the chief executive of an organization, the name has been co-opted a bit and now commonly refers to a business blog that is written by any high-level executive of an organization. Heck, even BusinessWeek gets it right: "Execs are finding blogs useful for plugging not just their products, but their points of view."

As in any other medium, there are differing takes on what topics are appropriate for a CEO Blog. There are some who take issue with a CEO Blog when it is injected with humanity. (My two cents...if a blog is going to be a medium of conversation, then it needs to enable a personality to show through, as long as the blog doesn't become an exercise in pure narcissism.)

The real power of the CEO Blog, however, is that it can be a strong – and perhaps the supreme – means of differentiation for an organization. Ultimately, products commoditize and best practices can be copied. The only real differentiators that are sustainable are the connections that form between members of an organization and customers. The CEO Blog is an opportunity for the individuals who are guiding the ship to make these connections, and to make them real.

No, the CEO isn't going to have the opportunity to connect directly with every customer, but that's not the point. The point is: when an opportunity arises, if the leadership is accustomed to engaging in real conversations with real people, those leaders can make the most of a situation.

"CEO Blog" example #1



Blogger: Bob Lutz

Role: Vice Chairman

Company: GM

Blog Location: <http://fastlane.gmblogs.com>

What's right: "As I said before we appreciate all of the comments... positive and critical, keep 'em coming. I would love to address more of them directly if there were more hours in the day. Every so often, however, a comment cries out for a response so loudly that I have to put thumbs to Blackberry."

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Part 7: The CEO Blog (continued)

"CEO Blog" example #2



Blogger: Bob Parsons

Role: Founder and President

Company: GoDaddy.com

Blog Location: <http://www.bobparsons.com>

What's right: "As I write this, I am now 54 years old, and during my life thus far I suspect that I've encountered more significant life events than most people ever dream about. Here's some information about me: I grew up in a lower middle class family in Baltimore's inner city. We were always broke. I've earned everything I ever received. Very little was ever given to me. I've been working as long as I can remember. Whether it was delivering or selling newspapers, pumping gas, working in construction or in a factory, I've always been making my own money."

The Business Blogging Field Guide, Conclusion

The various types of business blogs outlined in this document...the Tour Guide, The Recommender, The Maven, The Customer Advocate, The Do-er, and The CEO Blog...should give you some ideas of how you and your organization may be able to use business blogs to connect more closely with your customers in the way these other leaders have. We have entered a time when it is possible to really connect with customers, have conversations with them, and develop actual relationships in a manner that is truly unique and revolutionary. As BusinessWeek recently reported, ""Your customers and rivals are figuring blogs out. Our advice: Catch up...or catch you later."

We agree with their advice. The most important thing is to get started. ♦

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