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A Study on Content and Management Style of Corporate Blogs

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Abstract. Corporate blogs are used by companies to talk with customers. We did a study into 262 blog entries in 9 corporate blogs. The study revealed three corporate blog content types; three corporate blog management styles, and relatively shorter blog length and lower update frequency.

Keywords: Blog, Corporate blog, blog content, blog management, update frequency.

1 Introduction

Blog was used for publishing online journal when it was first introduced. Personal bloggers use blog for personal expression and communication. Nardi et al. [14] discovered five major motivations for blogging: documenting one's life; providing commentary and opinions; expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums. Blogging has also been used a lot as a knowledge management tool. Experts in a particular field can use their blogs to publish and distribute their acquired knowledge about the subject area [4]. People who read such blogs can interact with the experts and make their own voice heard by leaving comments as reviewers.

Other than personal use, blogs can be created and maintained by multiple authors within a workplace, a team, a family as a computer mediated communication tool. Corporate blog is an example in this category. Fredrik [8] defined corporate blog as “a blog published by or with the support of an organization to reach that organization's goals. In external communications the potential benefits include strengthened relationships with important target groups and the positioning of the publishing organization (or individuals within it) as industry experts. Internally blogs are generally referred to as tools for collaboration and knowledge management.” Early practitioners in corporate blog include Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, SAP developers, Oracle, Macromedia and etc. Although people predicted that blog will be commonplace for most marketers in the future, it seems that currently most marketers are still taking the wait-and-see approach [16]. Statistics from Socialtext show that currently only 5.8 percent of the top Fortune 500 corporate blogs.

It seems a trend to start a corporate blog for companies, but it is not so clear what people are doing with them. What kind of content should be posted on a corporate

blog? How should a corporate blog be managed? The purpose of the research is to study on the popular corporate blogs at present and provide insight in corporate blog content, management styles, and posting volume.

2 Corporate Blogs

Blog has “coincided with and helped to impel an irreversible surge in faster, easier, more ubiquitous publishing to a web of increasingly indexable, searchable, findable and collaborative information” [7]. Blog has great potential to influence our daily life, although it was claimed that blog is neither a new nor a unique genre in the ecology of interactive web technology, but rather a bridge between multimedia HTML documents and text-based computer-mediated communication [10]. Blog could also be a promising tool for knowledge management.

There are many tools developed to serve the function of knowledge management across organizations. Tools like bulletin boards, discussion forum, chat rooms have been employed by companies to build up community and communicating with customers. Different tools have different functions, and work most efficiently in the most suitable environment. Corporate blogs enable people to accumulate knowledge as well as sharing and managing it. Knowledge is synthesized by communication between people who come to this community formed around corporate blogs. Blogs facilitate this by making people easier to find, and providing immediate and direct communication channels once contacts have been established. Bloggers do not merely publish information, but also use the blogosphere as a source for increasing their own knowledge and supporting or disproving their claims.

The launch and maintenance of corporate blogs is mainly driven by business reasons. Cohen [5] identified four business reasons for blogs: establish expertise, create alternative media, extend corporate communications, and build community. First, leading companies in certain fields use corporate blog as a tool to provide professional opinion. A company can establish itself as industry expert by offering domain knowledge. Second, corporate blogs can serve as an extra media for advertisement purpose. New product and new features can be announced through blog posts. Third, corporate blog can serve as a direct communication channel to customers. It can act really quickly when unpredictable event happens. What’s more important, it is a two-way communication channel in that customers can speak up by leaving comments. The employees are blog authors and the customers are commentators. Fourth, a community composed of enthusiastic customers would be built up as corporate blog develops. In general, for most companies that launch corporate blogs, blog provides a way to enable corporation to talk directly with their customers with a human face and voice, rather than “hollow, flat, literally inhuman” to online audiences [12]. Customers are then connected with the company in a personalized, immediate way.

Other than the four business reasons above, corporate blogs are used for more practical purposes such as optimizing search engine ranking. Because the current popular search engines like google and yahoo usually give high credits to constantly-updated and link-rich web pages like blog posts. Small business can use blog as a tool to make itself visible among numerous search results.

2.1 Content Types of Corporate Blogs

Based on the overall purpose of blogs, Blood [3] identified three basic types of blogs: filters, personal journals, and notebooks. The content of filters is external to the blogger (world events, online happenings, etc). The content of personal journals is internal (the blogger's thoughts and internal working). Notebooks are usually long focused essays. Herring et al. [10] replaced the category of notebook with k-log, which "functionally resemble hand-written project journals in which a researcher or project group makes observations, records relevant references, and so forth about a particular knowledge domain". Bar-Ilan [2] listed three categorizations of blogs based on content: associative, personal and self-expressive, and topic oriented. In his categorization, topic blogs refer to blogs which aims at talking about topics relating to a hobby or to the author's profession or business.

It seems that different researchers have very different opinions regarding blog types. In the case of corporate blog, Dugan [6] identified three big corporate blog models: intranet blogs, event blogs, and product blogs. Intranet blogs, blogs maintained inside a company, are not applicable to corporate blogs that are open to public. Thus only event blogs and product blogs should be included in our case. Borrowed from previous study in personal blogs, we believe that there should be one more kind of blog type in corporate setting: knowledge blog. Therefore, we suspect that there are three types of corporate blogs: event blog, product blog, and knowledge blog.

2.2 Corporate Blog Management Style

Management is less a problem for personal blogs than for corporate blogs. Personal blogs are maintained by individuals who can only reach a certain amount of audience. The effect of personal blogs is much less than corporate blogs. Open corporate blogs empower employees to talk freely with their colleagues, customers, partners in an open environment. It is considered another official channel that people get company information from. Certain topics like financial information can be very sensitive under such circumstances. There usually are statements on web pages or corporate blogs specifying what kinds of blogs are appropriate and not appropriate in corporate blogs.

The ability to monitor and control what is being published is a big concern for companies. The problem gets more complicated if the company has a large number of employees. Some companies set their corporate blogs as only open to employees. For them, corporate blogs are served as a group communication tool which helps employees to communicate with each other without any outsiders' peeking. Some other companies control the content on corporate blogs by only giving a few people the power to publish blogs. Different companies have different strategy, which varies with the company culture, size of the company, industry, and etc.

2.3 Posting Volume and Update Frequency

Bloggers have to update their blogs on a certain level to keep their blogs alive. But how often is often enough and how long each post should be are not clear for bloggers. Louis [13] did a length analysis into blog entries on five A-list blogs. He found out that the top five bloggers created an average of 30 entries in one day, with each

entry being under 150 words. Liao [11] suggested that blog posts should be human sized pieces in that people won't be able to read long articles. Although it sounds reasonable that shorter posts makes more frequent updating possible and more posts are better for generating readership with RSS and in search engines, other issues, like topic, comprehensive coverage, quality of post, reader attention span [15], are deserve considering when bloggers decide the proper posting volume and update frequency.

Corporate blogs aim at building up long term relationship with customers. Posting volume and update frequency of corporate blogs can affect company image on a certain level. We are interested in looking into the overall patterns in posting volume and update frequency among corporate blogs.

3 Method

9 corporate blog sites were monitored for one month, from June 1st to June 31st 2006. Sundar [19] reported a list of top 10 corporate blogs based on the number of inbound links provided by technorati [20]. 9 out of the top 10 corporate blogs were chosen in our study (The one we don't include in this study is an aggregation of personal employee blogs). Among these 9 companies, there are 3 search engines (Google, Yahoo! Search, and Ask.com), 1 software manufactures (Sunbelt software), 2 online media learning companies (The otter group and O'Reilly Rader), 1 automaker (GM fast lane), and 1 online management consultancy (Tom Peters), 1 small business company (English cut). A total number of 262 blog entries from the 9 corporate blog sites were analyzed. For each blog entry, information about author, topic, posting length is recorded. Content analysis was conducted to decide the content category of the blog entry.

For each corporate blog, basic information about every blog post during the whole month was recorded. Basic information includes posting date, authorship, number of internal links, number of comments, number of trackback (if applicable), number of pictures, number of audio and video, and posting length, etc. Each post was read by the author to decide which type it belongs to.

Table 1. Company and corporate blogs

Company	URL of Blog Site	Industry
Google	http://googleblog.blogspot.com/	Search engine company
O'Reilly Radar	http://radar.oreilly.com/	Online media learning company
Yahoo! Search	http://www.ysearchblog.com/	Search engine
Tom Peters	http://www.tompeters.com/	Online management consultancy
Ask.com	http://blog.ask.com/	Search engine
GM Fast Lane	http://fastlane.gmblogs.com/	Automaker
SunBelt Software	http://sunbeltblog.blogspot.com/	Software manufacture
English Cut	http://www.englishcut.com/	Small business
The Otter Group	http://www.ottergroup.com/	Online media learning company

4 Findings

4.1 Content Types of Corporate Blogs

As we suspected, three types of corporate blogs were identified in our study based on their contents: event blog, product blog and knowledge blog. Event blogs are announcements or the broadcast of current events of the company. Product blogs refer to the entries that introduce the company’s new product or describe the new features of the product. Knowledge blogs refer to the entries that discuss the general topic in the field without a direct relationship with the company’s products or services, such as industry information, relevant literature [1]. Overall, among the 262 blog posts, there were 23% event blogs, 21% product blogs, and 56% knowledge blogs.

There are different patterns in the distribution of three types of blogs among different companies. For search engine companies, 40-60% of their blog entries fall into product blogs.

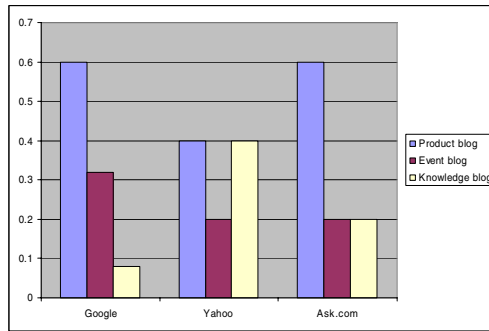


Fig. 1. Percentage of three types of blogs among three search engine companies

Three online companies are all short on product blogs and event blogs. Most of their blogs are knowledge blogs, which talking about general topics in the filed and discussion on current trends, etc.

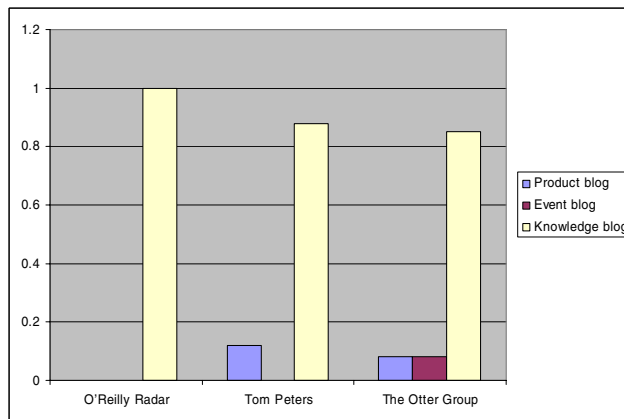


Fig. 2. Percentage of three types of blogs among three online companies

4.2 Management Style

Centralized Style. Centralized corporation blog is managed by one moderator and written by multiple authors. The moderator acts like an editor. Company employees send the moderator entries that he/she wants to post. The moderator would then decide whether to post it or not. When a blog entry is posted, usually the author's name and the position are displayed.

Companies with large number of employees and multiple departments would like to adopt this style. For instance, Google's official blog (<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/>) is managed in centralized style. Individual employees send their articles to the moderator and the moderator publishes their articles as blog entries. In the 9 cases we studied, 4 of them are managed this way. They are Google, Yahoo, Ask.com, and GM fast lane blog.

There are some advantages of this style. First, it's easy to control what content is published. The moderator's role guarantees that the content published is in line with company's policy. Second, blogs can be published with a more consistent tone, so that they don't only represent the single authors, but also the company as a whole.

Distributed Style. Distributed corporate blog is managed by a small number of contributors. They blog as a team and they post their own entries based on their own preference. We found that corporate blogs managed by group bloggers have the highest update frequency. Because more than one blogger can contribute to the blog and they can update the corporate blog whenever they feel that they have something new to say.

Usually, companies in this category are the one which don't have a large number of employees. Mostly they are online small companies. In the 9 companies we studied, 2 are managed by distributed style. For example, O'reilly Radar's blog (<http://radar.oreilly.com/>) is managed by five writers, who basically constitute the whole company. The other one is The Otter Group. For these companies, the blog team and the company team are the same group of people. They blog independently from each other yet represent the company as a whole.

Mono Style. Mono style corporate blogs are written and managed by one single person. The single person writes blogs and publishes it under the name of the company. Usually it applies to small business companies. For example, English Cut (<http://www.englishcut.com/>), an English tailor company's corporate blog, is managed by the tailor himself. In the 9 cases we studied, 3 of them are managed by mono style, which are Tom Peters, Sunbelt software, and English Cut.

4.3 Posting Volume and Update Frequency

All corporate blogs showed short blog length. The overall average length of blog entries is 300 words with a minimum of 114 words and a maximum of 570 words. The observation is in accordance with our assumption based on previous study. Corporate blogs want to catch reader's attention by not providing so much at one time.

As for update frequency, corporate blogs in our study showed varied patterns. The most frequently updated blog posted 2.83 entries a day (Sunbelt software), while the least frequently updated blog only posted 2 blog entries during the whole month we studied (English cut). Overall the average updating frequency is 1 blog post per day.

5 Conclusion

Corporate blog could be used by companies to communicate with customers more directly. We did a study into 9 corporate blogs. The study revealed three types of blog content: product blog, event blog and knowledge blog. Three management styles are identified: centralized style, distributed style and mono style. We also found that corporate blogs have relatively shorter blog entry and lower updating frequency. In addition, our study established a framework for analyzing corporate blog usage and contents. It helps practitioners to understand how other corporations manage their blogs.

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