

What makes a successful blog?

By Ken Sands, digital media consultant

There are, potentially, many different models for successful blogs. This is not meant to be a comprehensive list, but what I consider to be some of the best practices. In general, a good blog serves as a “one-stop information shop” for readers. This should help the reader by giving them **one place** for information rather than simply adding **one more place**. This is a critical distinction.

Definitions:

- There are **opinion** blogs, which can be written by editorial writers, columnists, critics, and are allowed much discretion in terms of personal commentary. Then there are **beat-reporter** (or photographer) blogs, which generally are not open to personal commentary.

- There are **group** blogs and **individual** blogs. Group blogs must be of a manageable size. In general, the fewer the better. Each person should have a specific role, and specific expectations about how to fulfill that role (how often to post, for example). Writers of individual blogs also need a clear understanding of the expectations. In general, most successful blogs are updated frequently – often many times a day. At worst, blogs should be updated at least 3-5 times a week.

- Level of commitment. There are what I call “**reporter’s notebook**” types of blogs, in which the writer is primarily focused on their print writing, and uses the blog as a supplement or online enhancement to their print work. They often publish random bits of information or details from their beat that don’t necessarily make the print product. Then there are blogs that serve as “**web-based beats**.” This involves a much greater level of commitment but holds by far the most promise. In short, the beat reporter uses many of the attributes of the web – interactivity, immediacy, transparency, aggregation, multimedia – to write for the web first. This, in theory, enhances their reporting, and the end result – which can be the print report – should be better as a result. There also are **special-events** blogs, or blogs with a defined beginning and end. (A basketball tournament, a festival.) These you can do full-time for a period of days or even weeks. And there are blogs based on **on-going stories** that are meant to be “retired” when the story stops being big news. (Priest abuse in the Catholic Church is one example of an ongoing story that would make a good blog.)

- Level of specificity. This is critical. Your blog must be on a specific topic, because on the web, readers are “searching” for specific information, not “browsing” in general topic areas looking for items of interest like they do in print publications. Therefore, based on the functionality of the web, they will seek you out when you provide information on the specific topic of interest. Unless you’re a celebrity, readers won’t come looking for what you have to say, they’ll come looking for information on your specialty.

-- Finding your franchise. Just as you shouldn't start a generic "business" or "sports" blog, you also shouldn't aim too low. While a niche exists for virtually any topic, you want to be practical. A typical reporter probably has one or two major beats or stories at any given time. To start with, have them focus on the major topics, the franchise areas of your coverage. In Seattle, for example, that might mean business writers and sports writers could do a Microsoft blog, a Mariners blog, a Seahawks blog, a Starbucks blog, a Boeing blog.

Specific practices:

Immediacy – Our readers want to know what we know, when we know it. They don't want to wait until tomorrow to read today's news. Often, being even an hour late is too late for competitive purposes. So a good blogger will post news immediately – even if it's just one sentence or one paragraph, and a link.

Interactivity/Social networking – This is critical. You must understand the notion that our readers (in the aggregate) know more than we do (thanks Dan Gillmor), and act accordingly at all times. You also must understand that news is a conversation (thanks Jeff Jarvis), not a "set-in-stone, snapshot-in-time, one-way-communication" that a print story represents. What does this mean in practical terms? Involve the readers in the news gathering process from the very beginning. Ask for their ideas. Ask for sources. Get them to tell you what they know. Go to where they are to engage in that conversation, even if it's not on your own site. Tell them what you're working on (transparency) and what you know at various stages of the reporting process. Don't worry so much about tipping your hand to the "traditional" competition (TV news, for example) because the readers and their evolving social networks are the real concern. You either engage them and become part of their social networks, or you lose.

Transparency – This goes hand-in-hand with interactivity. Post all relevant documents, notes, transcripts. Tell readers what you're working on, what reporting methods you're using. Tell them when you're confused or at a dead-end. They'll respect the authenticity and this aids in building credibility.

Aggregation – This is critical to making the blog a one-stop info shop. You have to link to every other source – even your direct competitors – when they have information that your readers might want. Linking is critical to the social networking of the web. You want to be an integral part of the network, not sitting outside the network.

Multimedia – If you've got it, use it. Photos enhance the appearance of a blog. Audio, video also can enhance the blog.

Summary:

The readers are in control. The sooner we realize this, the better we can adapt in this rapidly evolving media landscape. People are getting their information delivered by text messaging on cell phones. E-mail news alerts and RSS feeds are common delivery

methods. Facebook and Twitter are essential distribution channels. News will be highly customizable in the near future. What are you waiting for?

For more information, contact Ken Sands at ken.sands@gmail.com or (509) 496-2715