

Technology

Blogging and the B-School

Reap the institutional benefits from student- and faculty-written blogs.

by Karen Buck

Blogs can help business schools add a valuable human dimension to their marketing and communications efforts. But to attract attention effectively, institutional blogs must tell true stories with genuine voices and provide meaningful information from knowledgeable sources. To achieve such authenticity, business schools must be willing to resist the temptation to control or censor their content.

“Blogs offer a level of transparency that didn’t used to exist,” says Will Donaldson, a second-year MBA student at Tulane University’s Freeman School of Business in New

Orleans, Louisiana. Donaldson runs the independent student blog, tulanemba.org. When students plan to spend \$150,000 for their educations, says Donaldson, they want to know what it’s truly like to be a part of a school’s community. Blogs offer this kind of access without an expensive campus visit.

That kind of transparency can

make some administrators nervous. If a school’s administration is afraid that a blog will reveal negative information about its community, then it probably isn’t a good option, says Alex Brown, a senior admissions counselor at Clear Admit, an organization that provides counseling services to prospective business students.

“Blogging only works if you have a school experience that students are excited to blog about,” says Brown. On the other hand, he adds, the transparency of blogging can also

Five Steps to Starting a Blog

Find the Right Staff. If a blog is to be written independently by students, it may not need a great deal of strategic guidance. But if it origi-

nates with the school, staff may be required to create an editorial plan or schedule, develop the appropriate tone, and monitor and approve comments.

Columbia Business School takes what it calls a “curated” approach to its blog. A full-time staff member leads the editorial planning and development and does much of the writing. Faculty, alumni, and others often contact her with questions about how to contribute.

2 Enlist the Right Author(s). Blogs don’t always have just one author. In fact, a variety of voices can appeal to a broader audience. If the blog is written by students or volunteers, choose people who are comfortable online and already spend a great deal of time there, since blogging requires a time commitment.

Also consider “archetyping.” Seek contributors who represent your target audience. For admissions, seek authors who are similar



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bring problems to light, so administrators can know about them and fix them more quickly.

Set the Stage for Successful Blogging

For a business school, successful blogging rests on the fundamentals of any marketing effort: Identify objectives, create a plan, and enlist talented people to carry that plan out. Six keys to success:

Create an open forum. At the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business in Charlottesville, Dean

Robert Bruner has his own blog at www.darden.edu/html/deansblog.aspx. Before the blog was launched, the school's marketing department did have concerns.

"At the time, the dean had just started," says Ken White, vice president of communications and marketing. "I didn't know how he might react to a critical response on the blog." But when White mentioned to his student advisors that he planned to police the blog for negative content, they responded adamantly.

"They said, 'You can't. That's not how it works,'" says White. "They were good about teaching us that a comment that doesn't agree with the dean is actually an opportunity for him to facilitate a whole new conversation."

White forecasts upcoming topics of importance and suggests them to the dean as possible subjects for the blog. The posts themselves, however, come directly from the dean. "The dean writes on planes, in the car," says White. "Wherever he is, he'll do a post."

to the school's ideal candidates—a New Yorker interested in a financial career or a Californian focused on tech operations. Prospective students identify with bloggers who are most like them or whom they aspire to be.

Let authors know how many posts they'll need to write per week, month, or quarter. Authors should also be identified on an "About Us" page or with a short bio and photo at the end of each post.

3 Set Parameters. Like a Web site, a blog is an opportunity to tell a school's story; therefore, authors must know well the school's core values. They also must know what topics are off limits. You may want to consult with the school's legal team to create a blog policy and have authors agree to its terms.

But once authors know the parameters of the blog, let them go. Don't editorialize or control content. A blog's audience appreciates real people, so blog posts should be written in the same voices that authors would use in their face-to-face interactions.

4 Pick a Platform. Blogging is made possible by user-friendly platforms that work much like course management systems. Among the most popular are WordPress, Typepad, Moveable Type, and Vox. Emerging platforms like Twitter and Tumblr, which allow for very brief messages, represent where blogging might be headed.

Different packages offer hosted service, which means you don't have to maintain the software or servers where the blog lives. Others offer downloadable software packages that your IT group can deploy on your own servers. Or, if you have the right staff, you can develop your own blog software in-house.

5 Be Creative. Make sure your blog is attractive, professional, and engaging at first glance. Choose a memorable name for your blog and a Web site address that's easy to spell—and even witty and fun, if appropriate. That's what Columbia Business School had in mind when it branded its blog "Public Offering." An effective name ties in well with your school's brand.

Blog with purpose. To create a blog that means something, first know what you want to accomplish by starting one. Don't let technology alone drive the decision, White emphasizes.

"I get a call about once a month from a school whose dean or president wants a blog. My first question is, 'Why?' Most of the time, the answer is, 'I don't know.'" That's not the right answer, he emphasizes. A blog should do more than simply increase event sign-ups or applications. It should add value to the world—or at least to the conversation about topics important to the school.

For instance, Darden's student advisors suggested that Dean Bruner use his blog as a forum to share his speeches and presentations. "They said that when they heard the dean speak, they walked away feeling that they had heard something meaningful," says White. "That indicated that the blog format could offer a powerful differentiator."

The students pointed to examples, offered tips, and explained that the dean should treat the blog just like a classroom, with the intent to facilitate reader questions and feedback.

Use the blog well. Some schools have made their blogs the centerpiece of their communications plans. For instance, Columbia Business School relaunched its Web site in early 2008, giving its institutional blog top billing on its home page.

Columbia also uses tags, the topic keyword links found in most standard blog layouts, as an alternate organization and navigation system across the entire site. Visitors to the site can click on tags such as “corporate finance,” “real estate,” or “world business” to view all site content related to that topic.

Writers for the blog, www.gsb.columbia.edu/publicoffering, cover subjects ranging from Dean Glenn Hubbard’s bailout proposal, to Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke’s remarks, to milestones in the graduates’ lives, to faculty perspectives on the day’s headlines.

When all of the posts are taken together, the variety of information on a blog can showcase the business school in a way no press release could.

Choose a strategy. Admissions offices are increasingly using blogs to complement their traditional recruiting strategies. Blogs that show students on study tours abroad, interning at Fortune 500 companies, or working on class projects help the school demonstrate what is valuable and different about individual programs.

A blog also can help a school keep internal audiences informed—student services can announce a change in policy or remind students of registration deadlines, for example. It’s also a venue for information the school might publicize in a traditional press release, such as the arrival of a new MBA student who happens to be an Olympic medalist.

Build your readership. Encourage blog readership by asking people at your school to read the blog and post comments on it. If they’re willing, ask them to spread the word about the new blog. Ask for feedback on blog content.

To help increase your blog’s audience, include its URL in other marketing pieces. Offer RSS feeds or e-mail subscriptions, and register your blog with aggregators like Technorati, Icerocket.com, Google, and Yahoo.

Set up reverse feeds that pull in relevant information from other sources to accompany the content on your blog. Link to other blogs on related topics. Linking is a great way to get readers on other blogs interested in what you’re saying on yours.

Track your progress. Once it’s up and running, be sure to track and analyze the traffic on the blog. Analytics software can tell you how many people are reading the blog and even test the effectiveness of certain marketing messages.

“The blog has led to quite a few media hits,” says White at the Darden School. “Reporters call and say they’ve read the blog today. And we’ve seen inquiries by people who wouldn’t ordinarily consider Darden. That’s exciting.”

At a time when online communication is growing by leaps and bounds, never underestimate the power of a blog. When well executed, blogs can reach a variety of audiences with relevant, timely, and engaging content.

Karen Buck is director of cross media strategy at Zehno Cross Media Communications, a marketing communications firm in New Orleans, Louisiana.

NEWSBYTES

■ SITE FOR TEACHERS

The William Davidson Institute at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor has created GlobaLens, an interactive Web site featuring a wide range of teaching materials targeting international business topics. The site is divided into three areas—cases, courses, and community. In “Cases,” an e-commerce site, cases written by WDI faculty, as well as faculty worldwide, are available for purchase. In “Courses,” faculty can search syllabi and use “Syllabuilder,” a tool to help them create their own courses. Finally, “Community” provides a forum where faculty can discuss ideas related to the teaching of international business. The site, www.globalens.com, was launched as part of WDI’s Educational Outreach initiative.

■ TRADING ROOM AT KATZ

In October, the University of Pittsburgh’s Katz Graduate School of Business opened its \$2.3 million, 3,000-square-foot financial analysis lab. The lab features a financial trading simulator, stock tickers, tote display boards, 58 computer stations, live news feeds, and classroom space. The lab will be used in undergraduate and graduate financial analysis courses.

■ MORE INTEREST IN DIGITAL BOOKS

Electronic course materials are slowly gaining in popularity. Eighteen percent of students who responded to Student Watch, a survey from the National Association of College Stores (NACS), report that they have purchased or accessed electronic materials. While 52 percent of students did not know if their schools provided electronic textbook options, they indicated that they would pay 17 percent more for printed texts that were supplemented with electronic materials.



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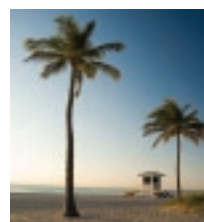
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What Color Is Your Web Site?

A recent study from the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls was designed to discover the colors that Web surfers find most pleasing. The research was conducted by Carl Blue, UNI assistant professor of industrial technology, and UNI seniors Christopher McGee and Ty Welu.

Blue, McGee, and Welu used an online survey that gathered more than 200 data points from participants, including age, gender, level of education, and profession or area of study. They then recorded participants' preferences for Web page backgrounds, text, and links.

They found that one-third of participants preferred a white background with black text, and a majority preferred a page layout with high color contrast and blue hyperlinks. Women cared more about a Web site's aesthetics, while men cared more about the details of its content. In addition, older people preferred Web sites that mimicked the look of the printed page, while younger people were more likely to accept a variety of colors.

These findings may indicate a preference for conventional, conservative Web design, says Blue. However, it

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

New Program for Financial Analysis

FRAANK analyzes thousands of financial reports for publicly traded U.S. companies.

A new software tool for the financial curriculum is now available. The program, which allows users to access and analyze the financial reports for publicly traded companies, was developed by Rajendra Srivastava, business professor and director of the Ernst & Young Center for Auditing Research and Advanced Technology at the University of Kansas School of Business in Lawrence; and Miklos Vasarhelyi and Alex Kogan, professors of accounting in business ethics and information systems at Rutgers Business School in Newark, New Jersey.

The Financial Reporting and Auditing Agent with Net Knowledge (FRAANK) accesses annual financial reports that companies must file with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The information—including profit, annual cash flow, inventory, and balance sheets—is stored at the SEC in its EDGAR database.

The development of a business reporting language known as XBRL made it easier to develop FRAANK, says Srivastava. Before XBRL, which stands for “extensible business reporting language,” there was no uniform language for companies to use in their financial reports. The SEC required publicly traded companies to file their reports in XBRL starting in December 2008.

With FRAANK, students and faculty can pull up years of financial and nonfinancial information, or find one specific category and time frame. The program can search reports in general or by tagged information, such as headings, footnotes, line items, statements, or other options. It also can translate that information into Excel or Access formats.

For more information about FRAANK, visit www.eycarat.ku.edu or e-mail Professor Srivastava at rsrivastava@ku.edu.

may also offer Web designers useful information on the relationship between Web design and usability. “The results reinforced the opinion that most Internet users prefer clean, clear visuals.”

The study is available at www.edsf.org/pdfs/Color_Preferences_In_Web_Design.pdf.

The Power of ‘Tweeting’

Just how powerful can an application like Twitter be to a student recruitment strategy? Very, says Scott Minto,

director of the Sports Business MBA program at San Diego State University's College of Business Administration in California. Since September, Minto has been using Twitter to reach out to prospective students. He already had created a Facebook group for the sports program, and Twitter seemed like a natural extension of that marketing strategy.

Twitter is a social networking service that allows someone to send out short messages—of no more than 140 characters in length—to users who sign up to receive them.

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These mini-blogs, called “tweets,” are designed to facilitate quick, easy connections between people.

“With Twitter, I can quickly tell people that an article is on the Web site, that I’m at a meeting at PETCO Park with the San Diego Padres, or that I’m at a soccer conference in South Africa,” says Minto. Those short messages, he emphasizes, can

DATABIT

In January, the popular social networking site Facebook announced that it now had 150 million users. Of those users, nearly half use the network daily.

speaking volumes to prospective students about the school’s partnerships and reach.

Followers of Minto’s Twitter feed are primarily sports enthusiasts who found him through their sports-oriented social networks. Among Minto’s followers? None other than Shaquille O’Neal of the Phoenix Suns.

Now that he has the Twitter page started, Minto plans to enlist students in the MBA program to send quick tweets about their classroom experiences. “Prospective students want to hear from current students,” he says. “Our statistics students can let people know that they’re working on a ticketing issue for the Padres, or our finance students can send a message about their project with the Boston Celtics.”

Minto says that it takes effort to keep the feed updated—especially when he’s in a meeting or on the road—but the effort is worth it if it sparks interest in the school. The messages are an opportunity for viral marketing that can be valuable to any school, says Minto. “It’s a great tool for marketers on a budget. It has an effect that can multiply quickly. It helps keep our programs on people’s minds and visible, without being too intrusive.”

Minto’s Twitter page can be found at twitter.com/SDSU_sportsMBA.

