Why Blog

It is a simple question with a complex answer. A strong blog is the core of your Internet marketing strategy. It provides content to fuel your social media updates, helps you build credibility and develop content which you can use elsewhere.

Blog posts provide a place to showcase work samples, case studies, product updates and company news. In addition, your blog can support your public relations and other offline activities.

Your blog shortens your sales cycle as it helps customers get to know you, your employees and your approach to solving problems just like theirs.

Finally, blog posts give you a steady stream of rich, relevant content which increases the chances your site will show up in Google searches.

Individually, each of these is a valid reason to add a blog to your Internet marketing. When combined, it's hard to ignore the potential impact a blog can have on your business.

This ebook will help you get started building a successful blog for your small business. We'll show you the steps you need to take; it's up to you to put in the work to reap the benefits.

Table of Contents

Why Blog 1

Table of Contents 2

Getting Started 3

- Goals and Measurement: 3
- Know Your Audience 3

What do we write about? 5

- Marketing Fuel 5

Who Should Blog? 6

- Guest posts 6

Writing Tips 7

- Start with a Good Title 7
- Writing by the Numbers 7
- Finding Source Material and Inspiration 8
- Email is Great Source Material 9

SEO 10

- Improve SEO with White Hat Tactics 10
- Avoid SEO Black Hat Techniques 10

Make your Blog Social 12

What's Stopping You? 12

Getting Started

Your blog is an integral part of your marketing program, so you need to treat it that way. Successful blogs start with a plan.

Goals and Measurement:

As you think about what you want to accomplish, try to be specific. When you start with clear goals, it's easier to measure the effectiveness of your blog. Everyone's goals are different, but here are a few common blogging goals:

- Increase awareness of your company
- Educate potential customers about your unique skill set or product
- Generate leads or referrals
- Increase customer engagement
- Schedule appointments, accept submissions
- Reduce service questions

And to measure your results, you can look at any or all of the following:

- Web traffic
- Form downloads
- Requests for more information
- Traffic to your contact page and a corresponding increase in calls
- Fewer service issues
- Invitations to speak at meetings and conferences

Whatever your unique blogging goal, make it specific, especially if your goal is something nebulous like increasing awareness. What does that really mean? Use concrete numbers to measure success.

Know Your Audience

This is your blog, but if you want people to read it, then you need to start with a clear picture of your readers. Who is in your audience and what are their reasons for reading your material?

Having a target audience in mind helps you decide what you should be writing about, how to phrase those stories and how you should promote them once they're written.

Write as if you are talking to one person

It is fine to have more than one audience in mind for the overall blog, but individual posts should focus on a specific group or section of your target population and what you want them to do when they are done reading.

Remember, your goal shouldn't be for them to buy things from you. Not immediately. A blog is about building a long-term relationship more than an immediate sale. Ask yourself, what's the next intermediate step?

It's reasonable to hope they will share the link, download a report, fill out a survey, ask for more information, subscribe to your newsletter or blog or RSS feed or simply call you.

But to move someone to action you need to find your reader's pain. Understand it. Plot their next action. Reap the benefits. Do you know your audience? If not, you're wasting your time.

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What do we write about?

The easy answer is whatever your customers are interested in. The harder answer might include:

- Industry trends and news – Customers like to know you're staying up on the latest industry information. Show that you're in the know.
- Frequently asked questions – What questions do customers ask you again and again? Use these as the basis for individual blog topics so in the future, you can direct customers there, as well as capture the SEO benefits of people asking the same questions.
- New employees - This is a great place to showcase the human side of your business. Remember that at the end of the day, people do business with people they like, so help customers get to know your employees.
- New products and services - Offering something revolutionary or simply an enhanced version of your previous product? Tell people about it on your blog. Give people an example of how to use your product, and make it part of their daily routine.
- Case studies and testimonials – It's easier for prospective customers to envision how your product or service might help them when they learn about specific examples. The added benefit of using the customer's own words to describe your service is improved SEO. They'll use the words others are likely to use to find you.
- Events - Are you speaking at a conference or sponsoring a little league team? These events are a great source of pictures, video and written blog posts.

How do you get started? The next time you find yourself answering a question in an email, stop. Is this something other people will find valuable? If so, you have the makings of a blog post.

Use your blog to answer common questions

Marketing Fuel

Your blog should contain a drop of marketing for every gallon of content. You need to sell from time to time, but you earn the right to sell by providing something of value to your visitors.

Give your website two types of content fuel. Primary fuel is the regular content, which will have a shelf life of about three days. Nuclear fuel is things like a study, contest, survey results, report or white paper. It takes longer to create, but will have a bigger impact. Nuclear fuel may have a shelf life of six, 12 or even 18 months. Nuclear fuel should be reserved for times when you want to jump start activity on your site–for example, when you launch a new product, service or program you want to call attention to. Save your biggest bang for when you need it most.

Who Should Blog?

Your blog is an official mouthpiece of your business. Sound scary? It's not, but you need to think carefully about who you want to be representing your brand. Is the blog going to be the domain of one person in the marketing department, your CEO, everyone in the company, or outsourced to a third-party provider?

There isn't one right way of doing this. Great blogs are built on all these models, plus hybrids and other creative combinations. What you need to figure out is what works for you. Who has the time to blog? Who has the writing skills to create compelling content?

Before you start blogging, establish a work flow for creating and editing posts. Go back to your editorial calendar (you have created an editorial calendar, right?) and assign blog posts to your team members. Determine who will edit the blogs and who will post them. Hold your team accountable, make sure people understand their responsibilities, and start blogging.

Blogs with many voices are more interesting

Guest posts

Your voice should be dominant on your blog, you absolutely should be asking your strategic allies, friends, vendors and clients to guest blog. Why? Not only does it flatter them (and they're likely to return the favor), it allows you to cover a broader range of content, create valuable links back to their websites and strengthen your relationships with these important groups.

At the same time, even as you're asking other authors to post on your blog, you should be reaching out and looking for opportunities to guest elsewhere. Take the time to craft a personalized pitch to the blog where you'd like to guest—no form letters, thank you very much—demonstrate you've read their blog, ask politely, and extend the opportunity for them to post on your blog as well.

Writing Tips

Start with a Good Title

Choosing the right title is a challenge. You have to find a balance between something which will catch the attention of a reader while still including important keywords. Tips for titles that help sell your content:

- Keep it short. One of the best ways to promote your blog post is via social media ,where brevity is everything. If your headline is a bloated monster, it won't fit into a tweet and isn't easily shareable. But even more than that, readers have short attention spans. If you can't tell me in a few words why we should read your blog post, how good can the main point be?
- Lists. Lots of social media expert types are rolling their eyes at this suggestion, but trust me, numbered list blog posts always perform well. People understand exactly what they're getting, and know they'll be getting it in short bites instead of huge text boxes. Are they cliche? Maybe. But they're cliches that get clicks.
- Negative. This goes against what a lot of people innately feel, but negativity rules in blog headlines. Go ahead, do some A-B testing with two blog titles. For instance, we could say "Do Your Blog Headlines Suck?" vs. "Does Your Blog Headline Rule?" Same content. We'll put folding money on the sucking headline getting more traffic. Why? It plays on people's fear of failure or their interest in seeing other people's failings. Failure is just more interesting than success.
- Be true to yourself. We've been told some people like to play a game with our multi-author blog where they guess who wrote the post based on the headline alone. Everyone has a unique voice all their own when it comes to writing headlines. Embrace it! Don't force yourself to conform to any one kind of headline. Write what makes sense for you and your brand, and the rest will fall into place.

Writing by the Numbers

People always want to know about the numbers of blogging. How long should a post be? How many times a week should I post? How long should the title be? Blogging can't be boiled down to bare numbers; even in the age of SEO, writing is still far more art than science. But here are a few guidelines to get you started:

- Word Count - Posts that are too long (1,000 words or more) lose all but the most committed readers before the end. Posts that are too short (less than 250 words) don't offer enough content to attract the attention of the search engines.

  So what's the magic number? Shoot for 300 - 750 words, but don't let word count drive your post. Good content will be found and read, regardless of length. If you find a post is running too long, split the content in half and create a second post on the same topic.

- Links in Your Post - Internal links in your posts drive readers to other related content. External links build community by making connections to other relevant sites. But how much is too much? How little is not enough? While SEO MOz says you can have up to 100 links on a page, this is clearly overkill for the average reader. Scribe SEO encourages you to have at least one relevant link near the top of your post.

  So what is the right answer? Typically, one link per hundred words works well. It shows the post is well-connected without being overwhelming. When you add a link, be sure to include a trackback as well.

- Number of Blog Posts: How often should you blog? The simple answer is that you should blog as often as you have great content. But for most businesses, you aren't going to see a real SEO benefit to blogging unless you're doing it at least two times a month. Something is better than anything, but there's nothing sadder than a blog that languishes without new posts for months at a time.

  At the other end of the spectrum is how often is too much to post? Some people post every day, and this is great, if you can sustain that without serving up thin content without much nutritional value for either people or search engines. But all that blogging represents an extraordinary amount of time and man hours. For most small businesses, set a goal of one blog post a week. Then, slowly ramp up.

Finding Source Material and Inspiration

You sit at the keyboard, ready to blog. But nothing comes out. You're running on empty. It happens to every blogger. Chase writer's block away with a few simple tips.

Good content is everywhere if you look for it

- Brainstorm topics with colleagues. Sometimes, you just need to talk a problem out. Ask your colleagues what they're working on, what questions they're being asked, what they think might make good blog posts. And if you get an idea during the day, don't forget to write it down!
- Do new stuff. Sometimes, ideas and inspiration come from the most unlikely sources, like a trip to Jungle Jim's, an afternoon spent with a two-year old or a walk through an art gallery. One of our favorite writing challenges is to select an image and find a way to weave a story or blog post around the image.
- Collect background information. Use Google Reader or another RSS tool to search for fresh content on specific topics. You might use these blog posts as the basis for your own original work. As long as you give proper attribution and link back to the site, there's no reason not to use someone else's great post as a jumping off point for your own masterpiece.
- Record it. No matter how busy life is, we all have pockets of dead time. Driving in the car, waiting for our oil change, doing the laundry. Make the most of these pockets of

time by recording a blog post. Almost all phones include a recording app, so fire it up and start talking. Even if the words don't drop from your lips fully formed and ready to be put into a blog post, you'll still have a strong starting point to work from, cutting down your time spent staring at a white blank page and wondering what to write about.

- Keep writing. Even when you don't feel particularly creative, just keep writing, sometimes you might surprise yourself

Email is Great Source Material

Too busy responding to customer email inquiries to find the time to write? Try this trick. The next time you respond to a question in an email, copy it as a draft for your blog. With a little editing, you'll have the foundation for a blog post that's applicable to a wider audience.

Expand this and review recent email, quotes and proposals. These documents are probably filled with language you can use to describe what you do, or what you feel is important for people to know about you, your product and your company.

SEO

With more than 600,000,000 active web sites worldwide how do you earn a spot on page one? There are many answers to this question, and the rules shift as often as Google adjusts the algorithms which drive search results. It can be a daunting task for the average business owner to stay on top.

While we have seen many trends and SEO tactics come and go, several things have consistently been important in the battle for the top spot.

Improve SEO with White Hat Tactics

SEO is complicated, but it's generally influenced by three main factors:

- Relevance – Well-written blog posts contain keywords your clients and prospects are likely to use when searching for your firm. But don't get too tied into using obvious keyword phrases; most searching is done using "long tail" keywords that are long and emulate our natural writing and speaking patterns. What does this mean? The more naturally you write, the more likely people are to find you.
- Recency - New content gives search engines a reason to come back to visit you. Since it's unproductive to update your home page every day, blogs give you a way to add new content on a regular basis. A fresh blog post, containing relevant information, gives visitors and Google a reason to come back.
- Authority - Google views each blog posts as an individual page. Like compound interest, there is a cumulative effect as each post builds on the foundation built by previous content. The longer you blog on the same topic, the more authority you have.

As Google attempts to provide more and more relevant content for each search, they strongly encourage making pages primarily for users, not for search engines. They warn of penalties in rank and position when they find sites guilty of trying to game the system, using tricks intended to improve search engine rankings which don't provide value to the end user.

Write good content and people will find your blog

The bottom line: If you write content people are interested in, you'll be found. If you try to outsmart Google, you'll lose.

Avoid SEO Black Hat Techniques

There are good guys and bad guys in every fight. In SEO terms, black hats are people who try to outsmart Google. Remember how they always lose? Keep that in mind and avoid these shady techniques:

- Keyword Stuffing - This is a process of using specific keyword phrases too many times in your content. Not only is this a bad practice for search engines, it makes the content

unreadable for human beings as well. Write as if you're explaining concepts as a friend, find synonyms for words you think you might be overusing, and stay human.

- Irrelevant keywords – An extension of stuffing, this is caused by adding irrelevant keywords to trick search engines and people into coming to your website. It's really a silly practice, because if the content on the page has no connection to the words, people won't stay anyway.
- Link schemes - Once the foundation of SEO, inbound links are becoming less and less influential in the overall ranking of your site. Even so, you still want to avoid "bad neighborhoods" online: spam sites and link farms. Having a link one of these sites to your blog or linking back to the site will adversely impact your page rank.
- Duplicate content – Duplicating content from other places on your site or from other websites usually won't hurt you, but Google ignores it. So don't spend your time copying and pasting; spend it creating new content.

Make your Blog Social

In the early days of social media, before Twitter and before Facebook was open to non-students, there were blogs. And blogs were social. Bloggers built communities and got to know each other by posting comments on each other's sites and using trackbacks. These same strategies still work today if you're willing to invest the time.

- Say hello. Take the time to respond to every comment on your blog. Until you are getting hundreds of comments, this simple touch will encourage conversation, showing readers you care about what they have to say.
- Drop an email to people who take the time to comment, thank them for dropping by and invite them back. We use a WordPress plug in called Thank Me Later which sends emails periodically to visitors, reminding them to come see us again soon. If you use this tool, spend the time writing the notes so they sound casual and warm.
- Return the visit. Turnabout's fair play. Besides, you might learn something!
- Take advantage of trackbacks. When you talk about someone or reference their content, be sure to include trackbacks to their content. A trackback alerts someone that you've written about them so they can come check it out. Many times, your subject will leave a comment and get to know you. It could be the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

What's Stopping You?

Stop the excuses. Stop the hand wringing. Stop the over-thinking. Your small business needs to be blogging, and if you're not, you're missing out on a huge opportunity to reap benefits from organic search engine optimization, social media and client good will.

We've talked about why you need to be blogging; the benefits are undeniable. If you think you don't have the time to blog, remember that you make time for the activities that matter to you. You go to in-person networking events, you spend time in meetings and you pursue other things that bring you business. Blogging is just one more.

Maybe you're afraid of blogging. Afraid of rejection, of failure, of writing, ask yourself: What's the worst that can happen? If no one reads your blog, you're just out a little time (and you need to rethink your strategy). If everyone hates it and attacks you for it, hey, you're getting attention, creating conversation. There's value there. If your writing isn't any good, how will you ever improve it if you don't just write?

Questions? Give us a call. We'd love to talk to you about your business blog

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