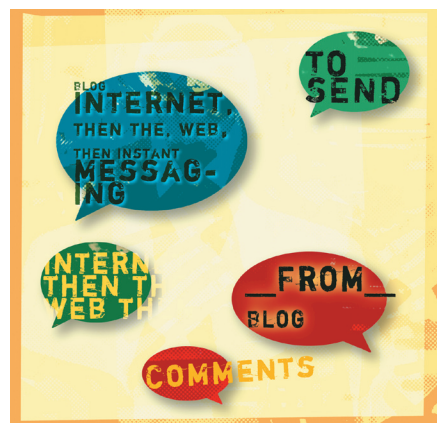


**Y**ou've read the hype about blogging. You've probably even tried it yourself. But is this new communications channel just another gimmick? On the contrary, blogging will revolutionise the way we publish information. **John Patrick, Attitude LLC.**



Late last year, *The Associated Press* reported that “blog” was the most popular search word in the online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Less than one year later, Technorati, a leading authority on what’s going on in the world of weblogs, announced that it was tracking more than 20 million blogs. Obviously, there is something big going on here. First it was the internet, then the web, then instant messaging, and now blogs. Do we really need yet another method of communication? Are we going to drown in information? Who has time to read or write blogs, anyway?

One of the ways that you can tell if a new internet technology is going to be successful is to look for scepticism. When people begin to say the hype exceeds the reality, it means we are on the way toward the reality exceeding the hype. I am not referring to new business models that are going to make water run uphill, but rather to fundamental technologies such as the internet itself, the web, Java, Linux, WiFi and others. All of those were discounted in the early days. Blogging has now entered the

phase where it is in the category of a fundamental technology - one that is enormously profound and is altering how information is documented, distributed, syndicated and archived.

As with all fundamental technologies, there are a lot of myths in the early stages, like “the internet is free” or “the web is for documents, not for applications”. Add to the list that blogging is a vanity tool for people to write about themselves or their idiosyncratic hobbies. Sure there are many personal blogs. Someone may write a blog that is only read by the blogger’s mom. A volunteer parent on a school trip may write a daily posting for the other parents to read. Pundits may write a “column” that is read by very large numbers of people. All of these take advantage of the “diary” aspect of blogging - but there is a lot more to blogging than people writing their personal accounts or views.

**What blogging means to business**

Blogging is a very effective way for departments of companies to stay on top of what is going on. We all know that special person in the department who always knows who is working on what. That special person is now blogging and providing the departmental “news column”. It is not a task that can be assigned to someone, it is a task sought out and enjoyed by that special person who loves to write, takes the extra time to add useful links to what he or she writes, and is a very effective communicator. Similar types of people will arise for customer support, providing valuable insight to customers and business partners. In every walk of life, the

“authors” among us arise to share their skill with others. The old saying, “I could write a book” is true. Millions of people have a book in them but, prior to the power of blogging, they had no practical way to publish it. And blogging is not just about writing a point of view.

How about warranty expiration notices, product recalls, press releases, weather updates, shipment notices, doctor appointment reminders, auction completions and wine harvests? Blogging is not limited to traditional documents or notices. For example, a patient on a hospital gurney moving from the ER to the recovery room can generate important information as the patient is wheeled through the doorways of the hospital. An RFID tag could trigger a short posting which gets delivered to the primary care physician’s patient folder. A periodic glance at the doctor’s blog reader would indicate whether there are any new postings advising of patients’ whereabouts.

The bottom line is that it will become very hard to justify publishing any kind of information in anything other than a blogging format. The web has billions of pages and most of them have nice layouts, colours and fonts. But most of them do not have context. Behind the scenes of every web page there are “tags” that describe what the page looks like. Blog web pages have additional tags that describe what the page is about. In their simplest form, blogs have five tags: date, author, subject, category or categories, and the content itself. These simple tags allow the content to be found, organised, categorised, archived and syndicated.

“Syndication” is a fancy word and it

is a hallmark of blogs. There are some sophisticated definitions of syndication but the significance and subtlety for most of us is that it provides a way to “subscribe” to something without providing your email address. Let me explain how this works. Every blog has a “feed” which contains the five tags (date, author, subject, categories, and content of the stories that the blogger has written). The blogger decides whether the feed will contain a list of everything they have ever published or, more likely, the latest 50 or the latest 30 days worth of postings. Web sites where blogs reside normally contain an orange “XML” icon which, if clicked upon, will typically result in an opportunity to “subscribe” to the blog. There are many blog readers available, such as Newsgator, BlogBridge, Bloglines and the Opera browser, which will periodically check the blog feed to see if anything new has been posted. This means you are “pulling” content from the blog, as opposed to email newsletters which are “pushing” content to you. Email newsletters are a thing of the past.

**The question of credibility**

Most of us are looking for quality, not quantity, when it comes to content. With blogs you can set up folders to automatically receive content from those bloggers and publishers that you care about. There are many sites, such as Technorati, that specialise in cataloguing blogs and showing how many people are reading them. Over time I expect to see more sophisticated metrics about the creditability of bloggers - something even beyond the multi-star ratings of buyers and sellers on eBay. In the meantime, it is mostly word of mouth (or email) that enables us to learn about good blogs from our friends. Many people regularly read blogs but don’t realise it because blogs are frequently integrated into a web site.

Where do we get the time for blogs - either to write them or to read them? Think of blogs as a new “channel”. There are only 24 hours in a day so when a new channel appears, it has to take away from other channels. Email reduced the amount of paper documents. Instant messaging reduced the number of emails (relatively speaking), and blogs will reduce the number of email newsletters, journals and notices of various kinds. Over time, more and more of the things you read will be in one of your blog folders - not in your inbox where there is a good chance you will overlook it or your spam filter will delete it. Instead of sifting through a huge number of emails, most of which you don’t want, you will be able to go directly to folders in your blog reader and enjoy the things you do want. Blogging gives “power to the people” - both the publisher and the consumer.

**Marketing opportunities**

As traditional advertising becomes more offensive and less effective, more advertising will find its way into blogs. When you type a word into Google - like “motorcycle”, for example - it doesn’t necessarily mean you want to buy a new motorcycle. You may want to find out how to replace a leaking gasoline hose on your Harley-Davidson (as I did this past weekend) and you want to find out what those in the know can tell you about how to do it properly. In some cases like this, when you find a blog page with information on it that you are looking for, you may also find an advertisement for Harley-Davidson motorcycles on the page. You probably won’t consider it obtrusive.

Tools are emerging to help bloggers - and especially corporate bloggers - integrate their blogging activities with their marketing activities. Some tools can analyse who is saying what and when, and slice and dice the information

and produce a clear picture of what is going on. Such tools can enable a company to find out what their enthusiasts and key influencers are saying.

**The future of blogging**

Last but not least are the multimedia dimensions of blogging. Podcasting is booming and video blogging is already beyond an early stage and growing rapidly. There is no doubt that the new iPod will make it more popular. A new breed of talk-show hosts find themselves behind the microphone podcasting their thoughts and interviewing their guests. Podcasters will be talking about baseball, sewing, stamp collecting and every subject imaginable (and probably some unimaginable). My dream is for podcasting to take off in education. Imagine Mrs Smith recording her summary of the day, prescription for tonight’s homework and a preview of tomorrow’s class and then the students listening to it on the bus with their MP3 players. Even better, imagine Mr Jones, another teacher, hearing kids in the hall talking about how cool Mrs Smith’s podcasts are and then going home that night to Google his way around the web, learning how to become a podcaster.

Is blogging the last straw which drowns us in information and overwhelms our daily lives? Quite the reverse; blogging may be the greatest new information channel yet to arise from the internet. For the blogger or information creator, blogging facilitates a powerful new way to create context-rich content. For the reader or consumer, blogging is a great new way to subscribe to content we care about and stay abreast of the latest thinking of those we respect.



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