



Blogs and podcasts: let the ad ascent begin

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT you wouldn't have to learn to understand any more new media for a while, along come 'blogging' and 'podcasting'. These online text/graphics and audio offerings have quickly established themselves as valid marketing vehicles, albeit for now largely for the picky digerati.

Actually, web logs – generally known as blogs, a kind of online personal diary/journal – have been around in their current form for nearly three years. Podcasting – fuelled by the spectacular embrace of Apple's iPod personal music player – blasted onto the scene last year. Marketers are still experimenting with their approaches to both platforms, drawing lessons from online advertising. The exploratory phalanx of digital marketers are quickening their assault on blogs, which are viewed by 27% of internet users, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, up from 17% of online customers ten months earlier (1).

For proof of the race to commercialise blogs, look at a recent Technorati analysis of the top 100 most-linked weblogs: all but 16 include advertising (2). For the user side of that equation, BlogAds.com found that 40% of blog readers have household incomes above \$90,000. In that study, more than half of blog-reading respondents said they had made sizeable online purchases during the previous six months (for example, at least \$500 in airline tickets and \$100-500 of electronics products).

The first blogs were born of passion – written by intent hobbyists, frustrated philosophers and even journalists who wanted to say something beyond the restraints of the daily editorial layout. Impassioned blogs were at the heart of recent political campaigns, allowing hearty proselytising. Overwhelmingly, today's estimated eight million blogs are very personal, eclectic rantings – the online successor to Speaker's Corner.

But the hundreds of thousands of business-to-business blogs represent legitimate, albeit sometimes dicey, ways to reach prospective customers, or for clients (user groups) to exchange opinions and experiences – good and bad – about companies. Blogs demonstrate the 'power of people-to-people communications,' explains Mitch Arnowitz, the MD of Tuvel Communications, a Maryland interactive consultancy. 'It's much stronger than buttons and banners,' he adds, underscoring the value of endorsements within blogs as well as the appeal of links to commercial resources embedded into the blogs themselves (3).

Podcasts are still finding their commercial posture. Since they are basically audio uploads, the listener can fast-forward through conventional commercials. Hence, the hunt is on for creative ways to put ads on podcasts. Again, embedded messages figure heavily in the plan – akin to the earliest days of radio, where discussion dwelt deeply on the merits of a specific product, mentioned repeatedly.

Meanwhile, creative uses of podcasting are emerging. Last month, cable TV network Sci-Fi Channel launched a convergence service that blends its conventional video

telecast with an on-demand podcast. The executive producer of *Battlestar Galactica*, one of the network's most popular shows, records an audio commentary about each episode, which plays back as the show unspools. It is ideal for multi-taskers. Significantly, the ancillary audio goes silent when a video commercial appears on the screen (4).

So how should we measure and pay for these newest media? The rapid emergence of ad-supported blogging is reminiscent of the web advertising frenzy of the late 1990s. By taking advantage of interactive marketing experiences, today's digital advertisers can exploit the lessons of the past decade. In fact, many analysts point out that blog advertising has, in barely two years, garnered recognition that took web ads seven or eight to achieve.

Nonetheless, both blogging and podcasting are still seeking revenue models. 'Bloggers don't know how to value their blogs,' says Leslie Laredo, president of the Laredo Group, a Florida advertising representation firm putting clients' ads onto business-oriented blogs. She points out that when bloggers first started accepting advertising, they charged \$100 or \$200 per month for a fixed position on the site. Now Laredo sees well-trafficked sites charging up to \$2,000 per month. She considers that to be reasonable, given that many blogs have only thousands of readers. In B2B, of course, those readers tend to be highly qualified. 'We have found that the most influential marketers and media professionals rely on these sites,' Laredo says, because the blogs 'are not spinning out reshaped press releases but providing real insight and provocative commentary' (5).

Meanwhile, marketers are forging new relationships with bloggers and podcasters, generating new revenue options and further clouding advertising/editorial separation. That raises veracity questions. It is easy for a company to hire a reputedly independent author to create a blog, laden with positive comments about the company. Truth-squad geeks often find and verbally shred such online pettifogging.

Clever marketers have even found ways to exploit this. IBM recently put its pro-Linux TV commercial on its website, with the intent that bloggers who write about Linux would notice it. Notice they did, with links quickly set up. Within weeks, more than 30,000 people downloaded the video – presumably potential customers who may not have seen the original airing, and now had direct information on how to reach IBM's Linux connection.

That is the kind of rapid connection at the heart of the digital marketing juggernaut. Blogging and podcasting are now officially ensconced in the process. ■

1. www.pewinternet.org
2. www.technorati.com
3. www.tuvel.com
4. www.scifi.com/battlestar/podcast
5. www.laredogroup.com

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