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Owners, managers catching on to power of blogs

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As a columnist, I'm competing with the world for readers. I'm not only talking about other media, but also every business consultant, chief executive and worker who writes a blog.

Blogs, if you haven't been keeping up, are Weblogs. Usually, they're a collection of personal thoughts and postings of articles on a specific topic.

First, blogs were mainly online diaries of teenagers. Politicians used blogs during the 2004 election to communicate with the masses. Business is just catching on to blogs.

"As the kids become more sophisticated, so will business," says Evan Gratzick, director of communications for Boca Raton-based Accrisoft Corp., which customizes blogs for customers.

Accrisoft is working on a blog that will track a start-up and an existing business for the Small Business Development Center at Florida Atlantic University. "It's for potential customers so they can see the process and learn from other people what they're going through," explains Nancy Young, director of the Boca Raton center that works with small businesses on financing and other issues.

Some companies are putting blogs on their Web sites. Others use blogs internally for projects or special situations like disaster planning. Lawyers and business consultants are among the professionals who have started blogs.

John Lawlor, a Boca Raton-based business marketing consultant, says blogs are an opportunity "in a casual voice to talk about something you know lots and lots about." One client is a divorce lawyer who has increased his visibility in the marketplace through his blog, bcfamilylawblog.com.

Blog entries are typically short, usually three to five paragraphs. "I think of it like an e-mail, writing an e-mail to a customer and telling them something you're excited about," Lawlor says. "Like all good writing, it addresses the individual. You project in your mind who's going to be reading it."

One challenge for a business is finding an employee who has the knowledge, readable style and staying power to write a blog.

With ongoing new content, a blog can help a business do better in search engine listings like Google. Lawlor says the most important development has been RSS (really simple syndication), which feeds most blogs automatically and can be downloaded from the Internet. RSS feeds allow content to be easily picked up and used on another blog, a Web site or e-mail newsletter. RSS feeds have the added benefit of being spam-free, he says.



Effective business blogs stay on topic, experts say.

Dave Taylor, the author of several books including the soon-to-be-published *Growing Your Business With Google*, teaches a seminar for businesses on blogging. Taylor says blogging (see his at www.intuitive.com/blog) is just one form of interactive communications tools that businesses are exploring.

"There's a huge difference between writing useful comments and spewing out more ads," Taylor says. A surf shop, for example, could use a blog to write about a surfing competition. The writer could point to a winner's surfboard, telling readers, "This is why we sell this product."

David Hinds, a researcher and Web consultant at Florida International University in Miami, has been studying blogs and other "grass-roots activities" on the Web for two years. Hinds says he sees businesses using blogs to communicate with customers, other partners and suppliers.

Employees also may decide to write blogs, which could raise libel and legal issues such as intellectual property rights, Hinds says. "There will be a need for companies to create policies for blog use like they have for e-mail use."

Businesses can gather competitive information through RSS feeds, which conduct ongoing searches for information you've requested. "It's a more efficient way for organizing mass information to your needs," Hinds says.

To remain competitive, business owners and managers won't be able to stay away from employing blogs and other Web tools, Hinds says. "We're going to have to learn it."

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