

UNDERSTANDING BLOGS AND PRIVATE COMMUNITIES

Since 1999, global organizations have leveraged Communispace Corporation to connect with the voice of the customer. With the emergence of “the blog phenomenon,” we are often asked about how private online communities compare and contrast. This paper serves to define blogs, discusses their strengths and drawbacks, and compares them to private online customer communities.

What is a Blog?

A weblog, or “blog” is the name for a web publication format which has the look and feel of a diary. An online version of “vanity publishing,” blogs are increasing in number, quality and topic focus. According to Business Week¹, blogs are “simply the most explosive outbreak in the information world since the Internet itself.” A public online forum, blogs enable individuals to express their thoughts and feelings about any and all subjects. Utterances that traditionally remained private are now shared publicly, online, with anyone. Bloggers can post content, include reader comments, and/or link to other blogs and websites containing noteworthy or relevant information.

Depending on the source, estimates are that between 12,000 and 40,000 new blogs are created every day.¹ According to some estimates, in 2004 between 2 and 7 percent of Internet users published a blog. Eleven percent visited blogs, and among those visitors 33 percent posted comments to a blog. One blog search engine estimates that there are roughly 275,000 new blog posts per day or 10,800 per hour.²

How Companies Use Blogs

Bloggers, and those who post comments to blogs, write about everything under the sun, including the products and services they use and the companies they do business with. As a result, the world of blogs—or the “blogosphere”—provides a new way for companies to observe and keep track of their impact on vendors, customers, shareholders, etc. Because the blogosphere is like a mammoth arena full of people talking simultaneously, the challenge for businesses is in learning how to listen and learning how to be heard (broadcasting).

Listening

Companies are investing in mining blogs in the same way they have mined other types of customer data in the past. Many are finding value in listening to the ways that influential bloggers—those whose blogs are most often read and/or linked to from other blogs—write about their products and services, and how readers respond. This is an effective way to take the “pulse” of the marketplace at a particular point in time—a valuable technique in times of change (such as a new product offering or a change in strategic direction).

¹ Stephen Baker and Heather Green. “Blogs Will Change Your Business.” *Business Week*, 2 May 2005, 57. See also Amanda Lenhart, John Horrigan, and Deborah Fallows, “Content Creation Online,” *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, <http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Content_Creation_Report.pdf> (29 February 2004), pp. 5 .

² “About Technorati,” *Technorati*, <<http://www.technorati.com/about>>.

Additional approaches to listening to the blogosphere include tracking certain kinds of data over time across all blogs (such as the % of positive to negative mentions of a particular company or product); or utilizing language analysis techniques to monitor specific demographic or lifestyle groups.

Broadcasting

Some marketers are using blogs to directly promote their products and services. Placing banner ads on high-traffic blogs catering to key market segments can be a targeted use of advertising funds. Marketers are also utilizing covert tactics such as offering incentives to bloggers in exchange for promoting their products and/or linking to their websites. Linking to company websites has the added impact of boosting company rankings within Google's search results. While both techniques have the potential to increase the "buzz" surrounding a particular offering, the ethics and efficacy of this approach have been questioned.

Another broadcasting technique involves corporate blogs. Written by employees from all organizational levels, these blogs, if used as a tool for sharing ideas and receiving feedback, create for customers a sense of transparency and openness (or at least the appearance of it). For example, internal product development personnel may blog to take the pulse of customer sentiment as it relates to their development activities. Executives have blogged to extend core brand themes. Additionally, independent thought leaders, or "gurus" utilize blogs to broadcast their opinions and promote themselves.

Challenges in Using Blogs for Customer Insight

Broadcasting complicates listening

In an effort to utilize blogs as an advertising medium, companies are eroding the value of "listening." Since bloggers are not required by law to disclose whether or not they are in the business of advertising, listeners are left to their own devices to figure out whether specific data derives from a sincere sentiment or is merely the statement of a paid "shill."

Lack of reliable demographic data on bloggers and commenters

With no standardized, verifiable procedure for entering or updating blogger or commenter identity profiles, it is often difficult to know who is blogging or commenting. When a data-gathering effort is designed to get a very general sense of what the blogosphere is saying about a particular subject, one might find a degree of success. But when data-mining focuses more intensely on smaller sets of comments, it becomes increasingly difficult to map content to specific attributes such as regional or demographic affiliations.

The blog belongs to the blogger

Bloggers are very often monologists. Their statements generally derive from their own thinking and not through collaboration with their readers. While readers can indeed post their reactions to what has been said by bloggers (or other readers, for that matter), the site belongs to the blogger—and most bloggers seem to feed off of this authoritarian or center-stage role. This point is illustrated clearly by the short discussion streams that tend to follow a given blog statement. Blog readers generally do not enter into prolonged

discussions with bloggers. More often a discussion string has one or two comments, if any at all. These challenges notwithstanding, the blogosphere can be a useful source of customer insights.

The Advantages of Private Online Communities

Whereas blogs tend to be author-centered discussions open to the masses, private online communities engage multiple people (usually hundreds) in conversations (which are often centered on company-driven issues rather than the view of one author) and participation is by invitation only. Community members are screened and specific profile data is concrete and known. Members are deeply involved with one another, and the community facilitators on a daily basis; facilitators pose questions, conduct research, and listen to conversations that members have with one another. Nurturing communities in this way fosters dialogue, deepens the connection between participants, and improves the quality and quantity of insights.

Efforts to track and analyze data are highly productive as the attributes of members making postings are fully known. Searching, browsing and data analysis tools make it easy to capture content and correlate data.

Exhibit One: Comparing Blogs and Private Communities outlines the major differences between blogs and Communispace-type communities.

Appendix A: The Right Tool for the Job outlines potential uses for blogs and private online communities depending on the company's objectives.

Exhibit One: Comparing Blogs and Private Communities

Characteristic	Blogs	Private Customer Communities
Sponsorship	Can be a single person, a small group of like-minded people, or corporate-sponsored.	Corporate sponsored.
Content	In most cases, generated by the blogger(s) with some blog readers posting.	Mostly generated by customers—through facilitated and member-sponsored activities, with some company-generated content.
Facilitation	Since the blogger owns the site and comments tend to be relatively few, there is little need for moderation/facilitation.	Community facilitators actively guide the conversation, re-directing, probing, or following-up as needed.
Public Visibility	Blogs are generally public, so all blog postings and comments are visible to anyone on the web.	Community content is encrypted and password protected, with access limited only to community members. This makes communities a safer venue in which to share and solicit feedback on proprietary content.
Participation Levels	Vary depending on the blog; in most cases blogger(s) are primary participants and number of comments depends on interest and motivation of blogger and blog readers.	Consistently “high” (200+ customer “voices” contributing), as communities are managed by facilitators and incentives are offered to members.
Contributors	Vary widely; anyone can create a blog (software is free) and anyone can post (providing blogger has activated this function in the software).	Targeted; community members are screened to ensure that target customer/prospect characteristics are represented and to weed out “professional” survey-takers.
Level of Consumer Dialogue	Varies widely; many blogs are primarily a venue for the blogger to communicate “outward” to his/her audience—either as a real or self-proclaimed expert.	Consistently created; facilitating conversations among customers is the primary purpose, and thus, there are always multiple voices and the opportunity to witness how customers influence one another.

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Exhibit One: Comparing Blogs and Private Communities, cont'd

Characteristic	Blogs	Private Customer Communities
Reach or Impact	Blogs are primarily a vehicle for a single blogger to broadcast his or her views; their reach is wildly variable, ranging from a handful of friends and family members to thousands of readers.	Though community membership is limited (to typically 300-1000 members), most members appreciate and understand their impact because sponsoring companies recognize and validate their role; therefore, members become more loyal to the sponsoring company.
Focused Information Retrieval and Synthesis	Challenging; number of blogs and variability of blog content and participation make it difficult to systematically gather specific information from key consumers.	Straightforward; valuable information is generated daily by key customer groups and is synthesized by trained analysts for the sponsoring company.
Trustworthiness of Information	We often know a little about the blogger and even less about the people commenting on blogs—it is possible for bloggers and posters to “misrepresent” themselves. Anyone can create a blog or post on a blog—they are a <i>public</i> format in which commenters can post anonymously (no one monitors participation, screens contributors, etc.).	We know a lot about community members (through initial screening and interacting with them over time). Communities are <i>private</i> forums where members are known, named, accountable, and develop trusting personal relationships with one another, making them highly motivated to be open and honest with each other and the sponsoring company.
Research Sources	Potential sources for qualitative data—considerable leg work is needed to gather targeted information from key consumers.	Rich source for qualitative data—relatively easy to gather information from key customers; quantitative data can also be collected through surveys.
Ease of Analysis	While a single blog is easy to summarize and analyze, harvesting and analyzing content from multiple blogs is a technology-dependent, hit-or-miss process in which you may or may not find relevant content.	Searching, browsing, reporting, and data analysis tools make it easy to capture content and correlate it to the attributes of the people making the postings.

Combining Blogs and Private Online Communities

There are at least three applications where it may make sense for a company to combine blogs and private online communities:

- **Identifying trends** — Use a blog aggregation tool to monitor popular blogs representing target markets or product categories of interest—with the goal of spotting emerging or unmet consumer needs. Then, introduce emerging trends to community members to test, explore further, generate product solutions, etc.
- **Locating, analyzing, and responding to “buzz”** — Use a blog aggregation and/or harvesting tool in order to scour the blogosphere for recurring or noteworthy sentiments or “buzz” surrounding your product or brand. Then, introduce selected blog content to community members to understand how representative or influential these buzz insights are and, when appropriate, help sponsoring companies develop effective responses or follow-on initiatives.
- **Evaluating blog production and consumption patterns** — Ask community members specific questions about their utilization of blogs to gain greater understanding of the perceived value of the forum. Do they post comments on blogs? How do they discover new blogs? What kinds of content do they seek in the blogosphere? Which blogs do they like, or dislike? Do they share content with others, or recommend blogs? Then, utilize answers to these questions to devise and test blog “connection” efforts.

Conclusion

The blogosphere is an exciting and dynamic new space that will continue to generate great interest as it evolves and morphs. Although companies are using blogs to broadcast their messages, they can also benefit by using blogs to listen to their customers. The impact of blogs on influencing customer behavior and driving growth and innovation is too new to tell. However, those companies that engage in an interactive dialogue with customers and utilize blogs and private online communities, individually or collectively, will be well-served in generating powerful new insights.

Appendix A: The Right Tool for the Job

If you want to...	Then use...	
Identify and capture emerging trends	✓ Blogs Monitor and identify trends as they emerge (if you accept the premise that the most popular bloggers are opinion leaders)	✓ Private Communities Populate communities with influencers and opinion leaders to uncover future-oriented insights
Control/shape a corporate message	✓ Blogs Maintain control over how information is communicated to the general public (through corporate blogs and/or paying bloggers to promote corporate messages—challenge: the public may not trust what they read on a blog)	✓ Private Communities Incorporate customers' language into corporate messaging and—due to the private nature of communities—iteratively test and refine messaging in a confidential, controlled environment
Track the spread of ideas	✓ Blogs Utilize existing tools to track the number of RSS feeds and track-backs that a given blog has (challenge: access can be problematic)	✓ Private Communities Utilize a variety of formal and informal “viral listening” techniques (challenge: narrower scope and less automated)
Generate new ideas from potential customers	Use to monitor and identify unmet consumer needs and generate new ideas for products, but in a very hit-or-miss fashion	✓ Private Communities A systematic, continuous, and iterative means of obtaining deep insights into consumer behavior and needs
Market or advertise to potential customers	✓ Blogs Write or place ads on highly-read blogs to transmit messages to a wide audience	Utilize communities prelaunch—during product and marketing development cycles—to ensure marketing efficacy and precision in building brand awareness and loyalty among a targeted group, but this is not a direct advertising medium
Generate trust and goodwill	Corporate sponsored blogs can generate trust and goodwill—but only if the spokespeople they represent demonstrate openness and candor, admit to making mistakes, and invite honest feedback	✓ Private Communities Build loyalty and respect for the sponsoring company through genuine dialogue with community members who are engaged with the company and provide honest feedback
Observe behavior	Blogs are a promising format for observing behavior of influencers, experts, opinion leaders and those that venerate them, but currently, authored-centricity skews validity	✓ Private Communities Observe customer behavior in ecologically valid settings—“eavesdropping” on intimate conversations, seeing customers sharing and reacting to ideas
Test concepts or sensitive/proprietary material	Because blogs are public venues, they are not an ideal format for testing concepts or sensitive material	✓ Private Communities Test concepts and other sensitive, proprietary material in a private and secure environment

Communispace

Communispace Corporation, a pioneer in creating vibrant online customer communities, enables businesses to directly connect market intelligence to business growth and innovation. The company's turnkey solution, including building, managing and facilitating proprietary online communities, engages customers in a rich and multi-dimensional dialogue, 24/7. By delivering rapid and continuous access to unprecedented insights, companies secure real-time results—driving faster product development cycles, increasing marketing efficacy, solidifying customer advocacy and overall, lowering marketing expenditures.

Communispace is headquartered in Watertown, MA with offices in Atlanta, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles.

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