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Time To Rethink Your Corporate Blogging Ideas

With Corporate Blog Credibility Low, Blogging Only Makes Sense As Part Of A Plan

by **Josh Bernoff**

with Christine Spivey Overby, Jeremiah Owyang, Laura Ramos, Cynthia Pflaum, and Emily Bowen

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Corporate blogs rank at the bottom of the trust scale with only 16% of online consumers who read them saying that they trust them. Furthermore, the consumers who say they trust these blogs are the most likely to trust all other sources of information. Does this mean you should give up on corporate blogging ideas? No, but you certainly ought to be strategic about them. Blogs that talk mostly about your products often aren't worth the effort. But blogs make sense if they demonstrate thought leadership; fit into a larger groundswell strategy with communities, videos, or the like; or allow PR groups to respond to groundswell threats.

RETHINKING CORPORATE BLOGGING

Is a corporate blog worth doing?¹ We ask because our new trust data reveals just how far down the trust scale company blogs are.² Here's what we found:

- **Only one in six consumers trust company blogs.** Only 16% of those who use company blogs say they trust them. This ranks lower than every other form of content we asked about, including broadcast and print media, direct mail, and email from companies (see Figure 1).
- **Regular blog readers and bloggers trust company blogs a little more.** Among those who read blogs at least monthly, 24% trust company blogs. And 39% of those who blog at least once a month trust them. Even among these groups, trust in company blogs lags behind most other forms of content (see Figure 2).
- **Those who trust blogs also trust other media.** Those who trust company blogs are a little younger, a little richer, and slightly less educated than those who don't (see Figure 3). More tellingly, if you trust company blogs, you're also likely to trust other media, even direct mail (see Figure 4).

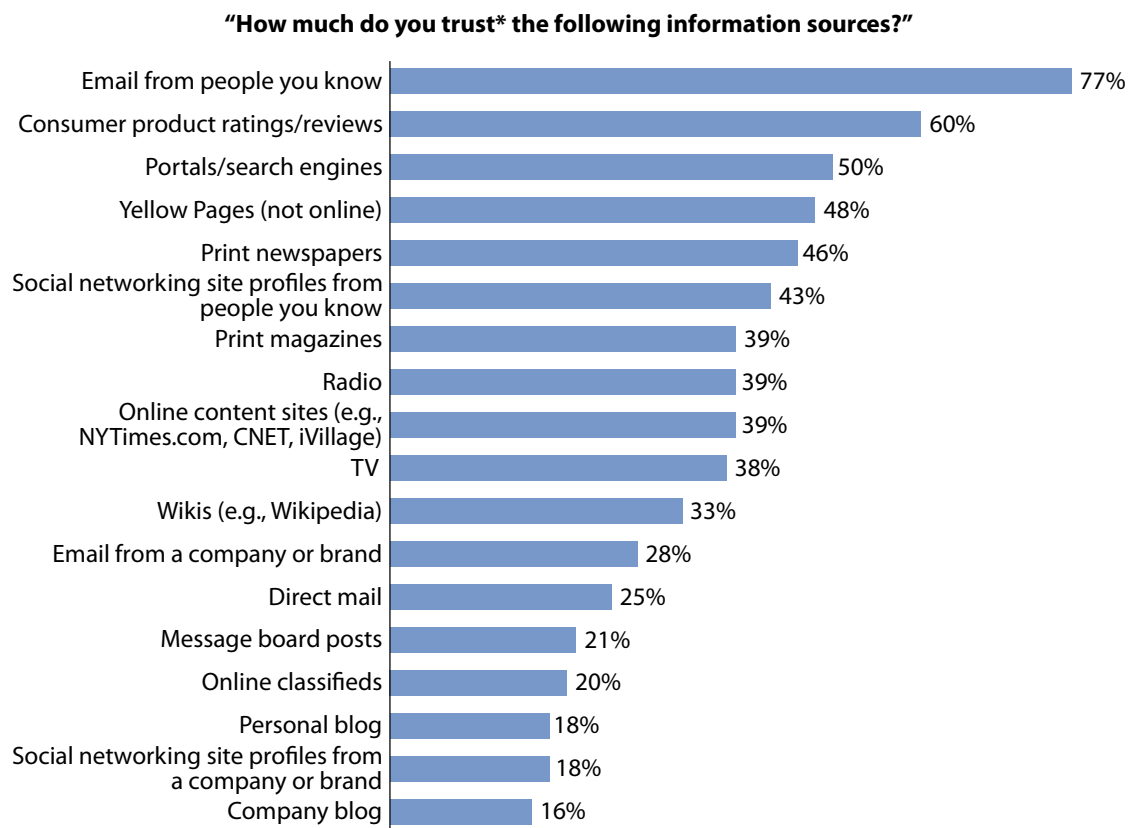
Don't Create An Ordinary Company Blog

When consumers say they mostly don't trust corporate blogs, you can interpret their response similarly to when they say they don't trust TV commercials or corporate spokespeople. Even as consumers ramp up their blog reading, they seem to believe company blogs created to further corporate goals are not balanced and are basically an extension of a company Web site.³ Of course they're skeptical.

If your strategy is to create a blog about your company and its products, give it up. You won't get many followers for that kind of self-promotion, and as our data shows, the amount of trust you'll earn will generally be low. Search engines love blogs but only if those blogs get links from other sites — and an ordinary product blog won't get very many.

If you've already created a blog like this, we recommend that you carefully measure results from that blog.⁴ Traffic is nice, but are the people visiting changing their attitudes about your company or buying your products? If your blog generates leads, links, positive reviews, buzz, or PR, it's probably worth keeping. If it doesn't — or you can't figure out how to measure its value — then it may be more cost-effective to shut it down.

Figure 1 People Trust Company Blogs Less Than Any Other Channel

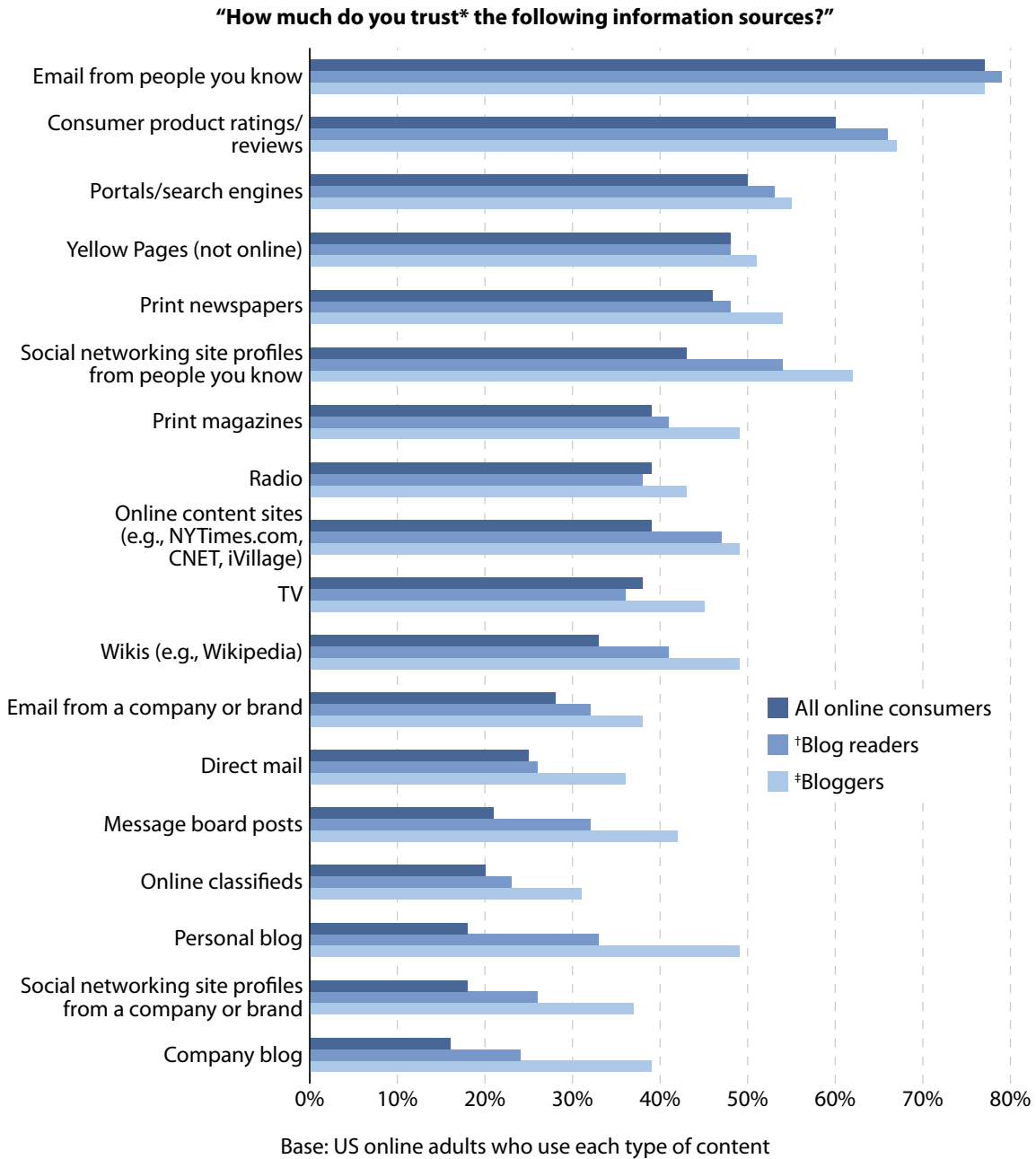


Base: US online adults who use each type of content

Source: North American Technographics® Media And Marketing Online Survey, Q2 2008

*Trust is defined as a 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 [don't trust at all] to 5 [trust completely].

Figure 2 Bloggers And Blog Readers Trust Corporate Blogs More



Source: North American Technographics® Media And Marketing Online Survey, Q2 2008
 *Trust is defined as a 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 [don't trust at all] to 5 [trust completely].
 †Blog readers are those who say they read blogs at least monthly or more.
 ‡Bloggers are those who publish, maintain, or update a blog at least monthly or more.

Figure 3 People Who Trust Company Blogs Don't Stand Out Demographically

Demographic profile		
	People who trust* company blogs	People who don't trust† company blogs
Percent male	49%	52%
Average age (in years)	40	44
Average household income	\$85,200	\$80,400
Percent college educated or more	42%	48%

Base: US online adults

Source: North American Technographics® Media And Marketing Online Survey, Q2 2008

*Trust is defined as a 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 [don't trust at all] to 5 [trust completely].

†Don't trust is defined as a 1, 2, or 3 on a scale from 1 [don't trust at all] to 5 [trust completely].

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 4 Those Who Trust Company Blogs Are More Trusting In General

"How much do you trust the following information sources?"

	All US online adults	People who trust* company blogs
Email from people you know	77%	91%
Consumer product ratings/reviews	60%	84%
Portals/search engines	50%	78%
Yellow Pages (not online)	48%	76%
Print newspapers	46%	75%
Social networking site profiles from people you know	43%	74%
Print magazines	39%	71%
Radio	39%	68%
Online content sites (e.g., NYTimes.com, CNET, iVillage)	39%	71%
TV	38%	65%
Wikis (e.g., Wikipedia)	33%	64%
Email from a company or brand	28%	70%
Direct mail	25%	59%
Message board posts	21%	63%
Online classifieds	20%	53%
Personal blog	18%	63%
Social networking site profiles from a company or brand	18%	58%

Base: US online adults who use each type of content

Source: North American Technographics® Media And Marketing Online Survey, Q2 2008

*Trust is defined as a 4 or 5 on a scale from 1 [don't trust at all] to 5 [trust completely].

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

When And How To Blog For Business

Like any other marketing channel, blogging can work. *But it's not about you; it's about your customer.* Our rule of thumb is that if the person reading the blog says, "Sure I don't trust corporate blogs, but I don't think of your blog that way," then you're on the right track. Here are some ways your blog can effectively escape the low-trust trap:

- **Blog about the customer's problem.** Don't blog about your products; blog about something your customers care about. Rubbermaid blogs about getting organized, for example.⁵ Emerson Process Experts blogs about factory automation.⁶ If you can bring value to your customers around their problems, they'll remain interested in you. Blogging about your customers' problems makes it far more likely that bloggers in your space will link to your blog, which increases both traffic and search relevance.
- **Blog to your hordes of fans.** If your product really is popular, you can energize your enthusiasts with a blog; social applications make sense in this context.⁷ This is why Moby and Benetton can blog effectively. If you make car mufflers, this probably won't work for you. In the absence of an Apple blog, its fans settle for blogs *about* Apple and the fake Steve Jobs blog, *The Secret Diary of Steve Jobs*.
- **Blog about issues at the core of a community.** If your customers form a tight-knit group with a lot in common, you can benefit from enabling them to connect with one another. An online community serves this need, and communities are interested in what you have to say — your blog can become a key part of this community. That's how it works at the highly successful customer community that National Instruments created, for example.
- **Blog because you're a celebrity.** Successful celebrity corporate bloggers include Amazon.com's Jeff Bezos; the Dallas Mavericks' Mark Cuban; and Donald Trump, who blogs at his Trump University.⁸ These bloggers succeed in generating an audience because they're rich, successful, controversial, and interesting, and they know a lot of people want to hear what they have to say. But if they get too corporate and self-serving in their posts, their blogs will suffer the same trust problems as any other corporate blogs.
- **For B2B companies, get your employees in on the act.** In companies that sell to other businesses, corporate communications typically sponsors the corporate blog.⁹ This is a mistake because product executives, product managers, and field marketing or sales support people better understand audience needs. When these staffers speak, B2B audiences recognize their expertise, trust their messages, and engage in the conversation. This is how dozens or hundreds of corporate-sanctioned bloggers at companies like HP, Microsoft, and Sun develop product connections with their particular customer groups.

- **In media, use blogs to expand the content and audience.** Media is unique among verticals in that its business — content distribution — expands naturally to include blogs. Turning reporters and columnists into bloggers can effectively expand the reach and value of content at both broad media sites like NYTimes.com and specialty media like *Broadcasting & Cable* magazine. These blogs work because they're not about the company; they're about the news.
- **Blog to have a voice.** This is the weakest rationale, but for the largest companies, it may be a necessity. A blog as a corporate voice becomes a PR vehicle — it's a way to talk about the company, influence other bloggers, and respond to critics.¹⁰ For example, Dell's blog, *Direct2Dell*, has become successful in representing the company's perspective — especially since the company focuses more on its customers' problems than on its products. A blog like this would have been useful to Motrin after the company offended thousands of moms with its promotional online video about the pain of carrying a baby around.¹¹ Those who blog for PR reasons alone should realize that: 1) most people who read what you write won't trust it any more than a press release, and 2) like all PR contributions, it's difficult to evaluate blogging's actual value to the business.

RECOMMENDATIONS

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD BECOMES HARDER — AND MORE IMPORTANT

Company blogs are in a vicious cycle now. Those companies that selfishly blog about their products will reinforce the idea that corporate blogs can't be trusted. This will make it even harder for new corporate bloggers to be seen as anything other than company shills. In this noisy environment:

- **Honest and transparent blogs will get noticed.** Those who write in a corporate voice will be ignored and ineffective. What types of blogs will consumers trust? Those that reveal tidbits about what's going on inside the company, those that comment intelligently on customer problems and competitor products, and those that speak like people. Robert Scoble pioneered this technique at Microsoft years ago, but it's still hard for companies to figure out. That creates an opportunity for you to stand out.
- **Blogs raise your staff's visibility, so create a plan in case they leave.** If your blog is more personal than corporate, the people who write it will become more visible. Scoble took his Microsoft fame and ran with it; in a less visible way, so did Max Kalehoff, who was president of Nielsen BuzzMetrics.¹² Bloggers don't stay at companies forever, so companies need a blog succession plan. Who will take over writing your blog if your highly visible blogger leaves?
- **Use Twitter as both an on-ramp and a promotional tool.** It's a lot quicker and easier to ramp up a Twitter account than it is to create a blog. This may be a lower-risk way for many companies to try out their voices in the groundswell. Even though Twitter reaches fewer people, regular Twitterers have the ability to respond to brand-storms like Motrin's and can move on to blogging as they become more comfortable. And if you have a blog, Twitter can help draw attention to the posts that matter most.¹³

ENDNOTES

- ¹ While blogging's value can't be measured precisely, it's possible to measure ROI for it. In our report on the ROI of blogging, we demonstrate a three-step process so marketers can create a concrete picture of the key benefits, costs, and risks that blogging presents. See the January 24, 2007, "[The ROI Of Blogging](#)" report.
- ² This data reflects the attitudes of consumers, not corporate decision-makers. But given the relatively low quality of company blogs aimed at business people, they have many of the same problems. See the June 10, 2008, "[How To Derive Value From B2B Blogging](#)" report.
- ³ Between 2007 and 2008, the number of people reading blogs at least monthly ballooned from 25% to 37%. See the October 20, 2008, "[The Growth Of Social Technology Adoption](#)" report.
- ⁴ Of marketers we surveyed who used blogs, only 24% were able to state that the blogs were profitable. See the October 17, 2008, "[Metrics For Social Applications In A Downturn](#)" report.
- ⁵ Rubbermaid's blog focuses on getting organized, not on its products. Source: *Rubbermaid - Adventures in Organization* (<http://blog.rubbermaid.com>).
- ⁶ Emerson Process' blog talks about its products, but spends more time on general issues in factory automation. Source: *Emerson Process Experts* (<http://www.emersonprocessxperts.com/>).
- ⁷ Loyal, socially connected consumers value content created by their favorite brands more than peer-generated content. As a result, brands with social currency have a unique opportunity to deepen relationships online. See the October 15, 2008, "[Brand Matters To Socially Connected Consumers](#)" report.
- ⁸ Jeff Bezos is one of the bloggers at the Amazon Web Services blog. Source: *Amazon Web Services Blog* (<http://aws.typepad.com/>). Mark Cuban's excellent blog, *blog maverick*, can be found at <http://www.blogmaverick.com>. Donald Trump's blog, *The Trump Blog*, is at <http://www.trumpuniversity.com/blog/>.
- ⁹ Our earlier research shows that 40% of respondents say that corporate communications plays the lead role in authoring B2B blogs. But their outbound focus lacks the customer insight and deep product knowledge needed to make these interactive tactics relevant, authentic, and involving. As a result, many corporate B2B blogs read like press releases and fail to elicit commentary or feedback. See the May 7, 2008, "[B2B Marketers Fail The Community Marketing Test](#)" report.
- ¹⁰ To engage bloggers effectively, marketers must listen first, participate in an ongoing dialogue, create a larger conversation, and measure to fine-tune their outreach programs. See the June 20, 2008, "[How To Connect With Bloggers](#)" report.
- ¹¹ To read more about Motrin's troubles with Twittering moms, see "J&J Pulls Online Motrin Ad After Social-Media Backlash," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 18, 2008.
- ¹² Robert Scoble writes about everything associated with social media. Source: *scobleizer* (<http://scobleizer.com/>). Max Kalehoff writes about marketing and social media. Source: *AttentionMax* (<http://www.attentionmax.com/>).

- ¹³ Twitter allows marketers to communicate with their networks in abbreviated content updates. Marketers should ensure that this Social Computing tool fits into a larger communications strategy before getting involved. See the October 16, 2007, "Microblogging For Marketers" report.