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BLOGGING FOR MAGAZINES

BLOGS—THE WORD is a shortened form of weblog—have made it through the early-adopter, trend and “blogs are dead” phases to simply become a key content type online. While the spread of blog-like features on many sites has blurred the difference between blog posts and articles somewhat, blogs are certainly a unique form with many advantages and a valuable component of a magazine brand’s content strategy.

WHAT IS A BLOG?

Blogs began as a sort of online diary chronicling day-to-day life. Through the years they have evolved to encompass a broader range of subject matter and register, including everything from daily photos to extensively researched news columns. The definition of a blog can be nebulous but some common features include:

- Reverse-chronological ordering of posts
- Commenting and sharing functions (though these may be disabled)
- A tone that is more conversational and personal in style than typical articles (see *Glamour’s* Vitamin G health blog for an example)
- High frequency of posts
- Varying style of posts, from brief snippets of quotes to longer-form, article-like pieces
- An emphasis on cross-linking and community
- A single author, or multiple authors with a flat (or non-existent) editing structure
- A focus on a single theme

WHY SHOULD MAGAZINES BLOG?

One or more blogs can be a worthwhile addition to a magazine’s cross-platform strategy. This doesn’t mean that all magazines should have a blog—always follow the rule of not starting something unless you can truly commit—but it should definitely be considered, even if it means cutting back elsewhere.

By adding a well-written, well-maintained blog to your site, you can:

- Increase the frequency of website updates with less resources than the same frequency of articles (some magazines, such as *Spacing*, use blogging as their only online written editorial)
- Increase interactivity with readers and other writers through cross-linking and commenting
- Add personality to your site and brand

- Increase search, referred and direct traffic through an increase in inbound links and frequency of site updates

WHAT MAKES A GOOD BLOG?

It’s not enough to have a blog—people have to read it. The best blogs have these things in common:

- Excellent writing
- Clean, readable, attractive design
- Easy to find, share and bookmark
- Fun, informative and enjoyable to read
- With a few exceptions, lots of great pictures
- A strong, unique selling point that resonates with the target market
- Participation in the blogging community

Good blogs don’t have to be personal, nor do writers have to reveal every facet of their lives. But most good blogs, especially in the lifestyle category, have the feeling of being personal. As Lisa Belkin wrote of personal bloggers in a February 2011 *New York Times Magazine* article, “the most successful of the genre, the women who manage to turn this into a living, or at least part of one, pull off the neat trick of seeming to share more than they do.”

What does this mean for magazines? You might have to give your bloggers a bit more free rein than you’d like. Make sure they know the boundaries and any off-limit topics, but let them find their blogging voice.

KEYS TO BLOGGING SUCCESS

Some tips for creating and maintaining a successful magazine blog include:

FIND A PURPOSE

Decide what your blog is going to be about and why. Don’t just cover every subject your magazine covers. Pick a focus and stick to it.

BE CONSISTENT

Set a schedule and commit to it—even so far as committing to time of day. Regular readers know to expect a new post at a certain time, so don’t disappoint them.

BE INCONSISTENT

Don’t think every post has to be an essay. Participate in memes like Wordless Wednesday, have a quote of the week post or look for other creative ways to keep up frequency without an over-the-top workload.

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WATCH THE NUMBERS

Know where your readers are coming from, and where they're going to. Take advantage of the data to create more of what they want.

PROMOTE, PROMOTE, PROMOTE

Is your blog promoted in your magazine? Do you feature new posts in your newsletter? On your Facebook page? Through Twitter? On your site's home page? How many ways can you draw in new readers?

BE ENGAGING

Don't speak into thin air. Address your blog to your readers and engage with comments and questions. (But don't be afraid to delete abusive or spammy comments that could harm you. It never hurts to have a commenting policy clearly stated—Garth Turner [greaterfool.ca] does a great job of this, putting commenting rules right above the comment form.)

JOIN THE COMMUNITY

Don't just write—participate. Comment on other relevant blogs (yes, with your name hyperlinked to your blog's home page), and make a practice of linking out to other websites and blogs, both when citing sources and quotes and as a blogging method of its own.

DON'T FEAR CHANGE

Sometimes blogs don't take off. That's okay—it just means you need a shift in strategy. Check in regularly with your numbers and writers to make sure you're still working toward the right goals. If it's not working, change the formula.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Once you've chosen a path for your magazine's blog,

there are a few more things to think about before you begin:

COMPENSATION

If you're hiring a freelance writer to work on your blog, be sure to compensate them adequately for their time, but be clear about expectations. If the blogger's job description includes interacting with other bloggers or moderating comments, make sure they know it. If you'd prefer they wrote more, shorter posts rather than fewer, longer ones be clear about that, too.

SOFTWARE

Many content management systems include blogging software, so if you use a CMS, check that first. WordPress.com and blogger.com (the latter owned by Google) are the most commonly used systems for hosted blogs (that means hosted by them, not you) and can be a good no-cost option for magazines with very limited resources. If you can install software on your own server, wordpress.org is a good option.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Many magazine websites use low-cost stock photography from sites such as istockphoto.com for most of their art. It's not a bad option, but if you're going to do it, be creative as possible—grist.org does a great job of making stock photos work. If you can, look for alternative or additional resources: get web rights for your magazine's artwork, or give your bloggers some basic training on photography and image editing.

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