Understanding Blogs: Your Blogging Primer
By Angie Pedersen

No doubt you've heard the word "blog" in the news, on the radio, even in our sister publication *Craftrends*. You may read a few blogs yourself. Now you may be wondering if you need to start a blog. Consider this your primer to blogs and blog marketing – the fundamental information you need to understand what a blog is and how it can help promote your business.

A blog is…

- Short for "weblog" – it's a type of website with specific features. One of those features is a chronological archive of entries on the homepage. The most recent entries (posts) appear at the top of the page, with older posts underneath. Archives are organized by date and can be categorized by topic.

- Usually delivers information on a particular subject.

- Offers interactive features such as comments, trackbacks, and RSS feeds

- A quick, easy, and inexpensive form of communication – if you can send an email, you can blog.

- A nearly perfect promotional tool for businesses. The interactive nature of blogs, combined with ease-of-use and frequent updates, helps build an almost-instant relationship with your readers.

Andy Wibbels, author of *Blog Wild: A Guide for Small Business Blogging*, adamantly believes that blogs can help your business. A self-proclaimed "blog evangelist", Wibbels contends that blogs strengthen your relationships with customers "because you're writing as YOU with YOUR VOICE, not your copywriter's." You can speak to your readers as you would if they were standing in front of you.

A blog isn't…

- Just for angst-ridden 'tweens, teens, and 20-somethings. Sixty- and 70-something's are blogging, too.

- Just for geeky tech gurus with years of coding experience. Beginners can set up a blog in just a few minutes.

- A once-in-a-while thing – it's a long-term marketing strategy. Effective bloggers post once to three times a week to keep readers coming back.

How a blog works

Bloggers post items to their blogs. When the blogger saves the post, the blog software sends a message out to RSS readers and search engines, announcing that a new entry has been posted. Blog visitors read the new entry, either there on the blog homepage or via their blog reader. If a visitor reads something that strikes a chord, she might leave a comment. Other readers will be able to read the new entry, and the other comments that have been left. They can leave another comment, or post an entry on their own blog, commenting on your post. Other bloggers can then link back to your original blog post.

How a blog differs from a traditional website

All blogs are websites, but not all websites are blogs. A blog is a type of software called a "content management system" that builds the infrastructure of a website. That infrastructure allows bloggers to post a chronological archive of entries, while also taking advantage of a variety of interactive publishing features, like comments, trackbacks, and RSS feeds. What really sets a blog apart from a traditional website is the opportunity for two-way dialogue with your readers. Not all blog hosts offer the same features or services, however. When deciding which blog application to use, look for the following features to make the most of your blogging experience.

- Categories that allow visitors to search your blog by theme or keyword
- Comments that allow visitors to leave messages on individual blog entries
- Permalinks are permanent links to an individual post. This helps extend the viral nature of blogs – it's easier to share a link to an individual post than to suggest that a friend go "search for the one with the cute lunchbox project".
- RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication". An RSS feed allows visitors to subscribe to your blog, so they will receive updates as soon as you post them to your blog.
- Trackbacks allow you to announce that two blog posts are related. (For a more complete explanation of how trackbacks work, visit http://snipurl.com/howto_trackback)

Why you should blog

The basic reason you would want to blog is to help you communicate with your audience. Because posting to a blog is as quick and easy as sending an email, you can quickly update and communicate with your readership, usually much faster than updating your standard website or sending out a print newsletter.

Through the comments feature, blogs allow you to solicit and receive almost instant feedback. When readers leave comments, they feel involved in the process and a sense of "ownership" in any resulting events or activities. This feedback will position your company as really aware of reader opinion, and fosters the impression that the feedback will make a difference in how you run your company.

What should you blog about?

Among countless other topics, you might want to consider some of these for your blog:

- Upcoming sales and promotions
- Newly arrived stock
- New classes schedules and class changes
- Project ideas
- Event announcements
- Trade show reports and industry news
- Frequently Asked Questions
- Customer testimonials

Is a Blog Right for Your Business?

Maybe yes, maybe no. If you change or update your main website frequently with company news, events, and current promotions, you may already be enjoying the marketing effects of an online presence. But, a blog isn't going to help you much if you don't use it – commit to posting at least once a week to keep readers coming back. (Tip: rotate blog posting duties to different staff members to keep the pressure off one person.)

Many business owners like blogs because they can post timely updates themselves, without having to wait on a web designer. If you are frustrated by the process of updating your website, and would like more control, a blog might be able to help you.

No matter what you use – website, blog, or website and blog – the key is to keep your customers and visitors informed with regular and frequent news. Remind them they like doing business with you, they trust your expertise, and that you can provide them with what they need.

RESOURCES
Find out more about blogs:
Giant Blogging Terms Glossary: http://doiop.com/blogging_glossary
http://bit.ly/how-blogs-work
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog

WHERE THE BLOGGERS ARE
Blogger.com – free hosted service
Wordpress.com – free hosted service
Typepad.com – commercial hosted service
Wordpress.org and MoveableType.com – install and configure the software on your own server space

BIO:
Angie Pedersen is a freelance writer, specializing in crafts, B2B, technical writing, and social media topics. Her areas of expertise include web content and blog marketing. Find more samples of her writing at http://angiewrites.com.