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1

The Blogging Phenomenon

1. A brief history of blogging

When you think of the key factors that have helped drive the success of the Web, you probably think of the development of HTML and other programming languages that allow people to build ever more sophisticated web sites, or the rapid advancement of the Internet search engines that let people find them... Now there's another development that is arguably one of the biggest things to hit the 'Net in the last few year: "blogs."

A "blog" (derived from the term "web log") is a web site made up of short, frequently updated "posts" written by the web site owner or another appointed person. This person is known as a "blogger."

"Blogging" — the act of writing and publishing blog posts — has had a huge impact on the way information is presented, published, and consumed on the Internet. And, unlike some online developments that turn out to be just fads, blogs are most definitely here to stay.

But this fact wasn't always as apparent as it is today. When the first few blogs appeared on the Web at the tail end of the 1990s, no one could have predicted the amazing growth they would experience over the next few years.

Blogs started as a simple, user-friendly way for people to publish on the 'Net and regularly update their thoughts and views, information relevant to their readers, and links to other web sites. However, these early blogs were mostly produced by people with a lot of HTML programming knowledge, and they catered to a narrow audience of technically minded people.

Then, in 1999, an easy-to-use online application called Blogger (www.blogger.com) made blogging accessible to anyone, and this new technology really started to take off. And when

mighty Google (www.google.com) bought Blogger in 2003, the search engine secured the future popularity of blogging as an online activity for millions of people. The number of blogs on the Internet soared, and blogging officially became an online phenomenon!

In fact, in 2004, Merriam-Webster's online dictionary named "blog" as Word of the Year, meaning more people had searched for that word in their online database than any other during the year!

One reason for this was that 2004 was an election year in the US, and blogs gained unprecedented media coverage as individual bloggers added their independent voices to the usual mainstream media election coverage. The new voices of these bloggers proved very popular with online readers.

Other major happenings that year, such as the continuing war in Iraq and the tsunami in Southeast Asia, helped bring blogging to the fore, with the eyewitness accounts of bloggers caught up in these events being widely reported in the online and offline mainstream media.

Blogging had arrived, and arrived with a bang!

Since then, blogging has continued to grow in leaps and bounds, becoming more and more popular as time goes by. And there are no signs of this incredible trend slowing down! Just look at a few blog-related statistics...

- A search for "blog" on Google in November 2005 showed 475 million results (compared to 173 million at the start of the year)!
- Blog directory Technorati (www.technorati.com) was tracking more than 21 million blogs by November 2005... up from 7 million at the start of the year. (In 2003, there were just 100,000!)
- A new blog is created every second (Technorati).
- Bloggers add more than 33,000 new blog posts every hour (Technorati).

Plus, the Internet "big boys" have all joined in, with Yahoo 360 (<http://360.yahoo.com>), MSN Spaces (<http://spaces.msn.com>), and AOL journals (<http://hometown.aol.com>) joining Google's Blogger in taking blogging to the masses.

The result of this blog explosion is that everyone from movie stars to work-at-home moms, from farmers to the CEOs of major corporations, can now have their own blog. And many do!

But what exactly is a blog, and why have they taken off to the point where, in October 2005, AdAge.com reported that American workers would spend the equivalent of 551,000 *years* reading blogs in that year?

2. What is a blog?

A blog can be a stand-alone web site, or can form part of a larger web site. It's made up of short articles or pieces of information (known as "posts") that usually contain links to other relevant articles or web sites.

These posts are written by the web site owner, or by another appointed person, on a regular basis, with the most recent post appearing at the top of the page. Blogging software automatically archives each post by date, and often by category, so it's easy to find older posts. This "reverse chronological" content system and automatic archiving make blogs different from regular web sites.

Another difference is the "comments" system common to most blogs which allows bloggers to have "conversations" with their readers by letting visitors post their own comments or views on the topic being discussed.

Blogging allows anyone and everyone to have a voice online, no matter their level of technical knowledge. This influx of fresh voices onto the Internet, combined with the open communication blogging encourages, has helped stop the Web from becoming dominated by large corporations, mainstream media outlets, and "tech-heads."

Blogs have become flexible tools with many different uses — but most importantly for our purposes, blogs have become a highly effective business tool. Both online and offline businesses can use blogs to take their products and services to a wider audience, increasing their traffic, leads, and sales. There are even bloggers today whose sole source of income is blogging!

However, before we start exploring how a blog can benefit your business, it's important that you understand why blogs have become so popular.

3. Why are blogs so popular?

Bloggers and their readers love blogs, for a number of reasons. One key reason is that there are a lot of very good blog writers out there, all sharing their opinions, knowledge, and advice on topics people are interested in reading about.

It's the "human" aspect of blogs that draws many people to them. Bloggers tend to write in a very personal and informal style, which is in contrast to the many more corporate and "faceless" web sites out there.

Another very popular feature of blogging is it's conversational aspect. Many blogs allow visitors to leave comments on what they've read; other visitors can then reply to those comments and continue the discussion. Popular blogs often create a sense of community (very much like an online discussion forum) because the same people return again and again to post comments and connect with other people interested in the same topics.

Blogs also offer people new, fresh voices and opinions — a change from the mainstream media and online news web sites. And since blog posts are usually brief, regularly updated, and easy to read, many people now read their favorite blogs every day, much as they would an online newspaper or magazine.

In addition, just as most people can find a magazine or web site that caters to their interests, they can now find a blog on their favorite subject, too. There really is a blog for everyone! For example...

- Some blogs, such as www.dooce.com, offer a “slice of life” — an insight into someone else’s day-to-day existence at work or at home (much like the “reality” TV that has become so popular in recent years).
- Some offer fresh insights into current events and topics of interest , such as the political blog www.wonkette.com.
- Some blogs are written by experts on a particular subject, such as the blog of Google employee Matt Cutts, www.mattcutts.com/blog.
- Some cater to a very specific audience and bring like-minded people together, such as the popular illustration blog www.drawn.ca.
- Some provide up-to-the-minute news and information on certain topics, such as the new technology blog www.engadget.com.
- Many blogs are written as an online journal with no particular audience in mind other than perhaps the writer’s friends and family. To find examples of these, go to a blog directory site such as Blog Explosion at www.blogexplosion.com and browse the “Personal Diary” category. (It’s by far the largest category!)

From the point of view of bloggers themselves, the incredibly user-friendly content management system offered by blogging is a major factor in blogging’s rapid ascent. People jumped at the chance to publish their thoughts and views on the Internet without needing any special technical knowledge — or even their own web site!

The services of providers like Blogger (www.blogger.com) and Typepad (www.typepad.com) made blogging easy to use, quick, and inexpensive or even free... and the result is that blogging now plays a major role in today’s online communication.

And that’s why, if you have an online or offline business — or even no business at all — blogs are one online development that you simply can’t ignore.