

Why are blogs important for your business?

Blogs provide business owners with unprecedented ways of reaching and engaging with large audiences in a way that the traditional one-way information push of a company Web site could never do. Not only this, but blogs can help put a human face to your business while showcasing your knowledge and passion for your chosen field. For example, restaurant owners can share recipe secrets. Just about anyone from a landscaping business to an IT security company can share tips of the trade that connect them with their customer base. And unlike the static content of a business Web site, blogs are collaborative and invite comment - a great way to engage with and solicit feedback from your customers!

Blogs can even be lead generating. I read and monitor blogs religiously and have nurtured leads and networked with businesses that I would not have known existed, had it not been for the viral marketing effect generated by their blogs. Of course, if you are thinking of starting a blog you need to have an underlying strategy in place to ensure it is a success. Here are four things to consider before you enter the blogosphere:

1. Identify a Purpose, Goal and Intention for your Blog

While you obviously want to promote your business, don't be over-promotional in your blog content strategy. Decide early on what you want to accomplish with your blog - and this should drive your content.

Most blogs are typically centered on positioning businesses or business owners as thought leaders in their space or for sharing information and tips that readers find useful.

Once you have defined your goal, be sure to adhere to it. Consider publishing your blog objective on your blog home page. For example, the objective of a hypothetical company - JJ's Landscaping Services - might be to provide tips that help consumers maintain a thriving garden in all seasons, which could be summarized and published as: *The Better Garden Blog Tips and Tools from our team of experts to keep your garden looking its best year round!*

2. Getting Started - Blog Software

Once you have decided to start blogging, you will need to consider the software options available for hosting your blog. Many social media experts advise businesses to be wary of some of the free blog tools available, since their basic features don't offer integration with existing business Web domains or allow for brand customization.

Truth be told, however, if you are just getting started with a blog, free blogging software can be a cost-effective and easy solution for many small businesses. If your blog does take off down the road, you might want to consider migrating to blog software that is installed on your domain and integrated with your Web site. And don't forget to devise a communication plan to let your readers know that you are moving hosts!

3. Commit to Blogging Regularly and with Relevance

There are two telltale signs that a blog has lost its way - no posts for two weeks or more, and content that has veered off course. Neither will give a favorable impression of your company.

If you can't commit to posting at least 2-3 times a week, then blogging is not going to work for your business. And this is something to consider before you even start your blog. A good way to keep posts regular is to share duties with others. This also adds a diversity of voices. Having an editorial calendar can also keep you on track. Written in advance (for the coming month or quarter), an editorial calendar should include not just the working title of upcoming posts, but a summary of the objective of each post too. Also include hyperlinks to other resources that can help you craft your post quickly and efficiently when it comes time to write. Don't forget to include placeholders for topical posts that spring up at the last minute. For example, in the case of our hypothetical company - JJ's Landscaping Services - topical posts that address current issues such as protracted weather conditions can keep your blog relevant and compelling.

4. Develop a Plan to Generate Traffic to your Blog

Last, but by no means least, generating traffic to your blog is critical. The trouble is, many bloggers either do nothing to leverage the tactics available to them, or they go overboard and saturate their blog pages with links and social media icons to drive inbound traffic.

There are many traditional and non-traditional ways to drive traffic to your blog - from ensuring you have RSS feeds built in to adding a link to your blog from other customer touch points such as your email signature and main business Web site.

Happy blogging!