

Blogging For Branding



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1

INTRODUCTION

Making your business, product or service stand out from the pack as a trusted name is the key to success. When people automatically purchase your products or services and try new offerings because they have learned to trust what you have to offer, your path is assured.

Putting yourself on this path calls for building your brand. This is more than a logo. It involves building up an inherent trust and an instinctual belief in the quality of a product or service based on the brand name behind it.

Consider some of the products you purchase in everyday life strictly because of the logo on the label. When you recognize a product from its logo or are willing to go out on a limb and try something new because a company you recognize sponsors a product, that's a result of successful branding. It is a proven, effective way to build rapport with customers and gain repeat business.

While branding does involve a number of facets, today's Internet-based world has given rise to a new tool to get the word out and make the connection with clients. A blog can serve as an "in" to help you reach out to customers on a more personal level as you seek to gain and build upon their trust.

Many companies large and small have turned to the Web to boost their own branding efforts. Blogging is one of the most powerful ways available on the Internet to add to branding efforts for a few key reasons. When these often conversational vehicles are used to reach out to customers and potential customers a sense of connection is gained. When the general public feels "connected" to a product or service, they tend to bring repeat business.

Creating your own blog to boost your company's brand is not a terribly difficult task. It does require a minimal amount of technical savvy, solid planning skills and a willingness to reach out beyond the traditional boundaries of conventional advertising.

Blogging itself has gained immensely in popularity over the last few years. Where only a few blogs existed on the Internet in the 1990s, the blogosphere is now filled with thousands of sites. Blogs today are written for a wide variety of reasons. Some bloggers write simply to connect with their own friends and family, others share political views or discuss

hobbies, still others use this unique tool to promote their brand and foster a connection with readers (customers). When the latter is the focus, a well-defined plan can ensure that this less formalized means of reaching out to people serves the purpose and builds the brand, its reputation and its popularity.

It honestly does not matter what type of brand you are trying to build, blogging can serve as a vital component in a marketing plan. When a blog is well written, updated on a consistent basis, promoted properly and contains useful information for visitors, brand recognition will go along with it. Businesses of all sizes are using blogs in growing number to connect with their own clients and you can, too.

If you'd like to learn how to create a blog to promote your own brand, you're going to need a plan to make it happen successfully. In this eBook, we will go over the basics of what you need to do and why. We'll also discuss how to make blogging fit into branding plans no matter what type of business you happen to have – even if your business is blogging itself. In addition, we'll get into some of the technical details and cover some of the options you have available to you for launching and maintaining a blog. While a brand blog will take dedication to really pay off, you do not necessarily have to do all the work personally.

To fully understand the potential power of a well-developed blog, it does help to have a handle on some of the key components of this format. When a blog is used to its full advantage it will not only enable you to reach out to clients and potential clients, but it will give them the ability to reach back. This two-way communication can serve as a powerful means for developing rapport, trust and repeat business.

Blogging is a very effective way to boost an overall branding plan. If you're ready to learn more about this communications tool, we'll show you step-by-step how to make it work for your business.

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WHAT BRANDING CAN DO FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Take a look around your house at some of the products you purchase on a regular basis. Why do you choose a particular brand of maple syrup or toilet bowl cleaner? Chances are you recognized the name on the label or the logo and on the packaging and were “presold” because you connected that name or logo with quality. You may not have even read past the name to make the decision to purchase.

That’s the power of branding. When you can connect your product or service with a reputation of quality and trust, you catapult yourself into household-name status. It doesn’t matter whether your business targets only a small geographical area or if you market on an international level, the power of branding can be immense. Blogging can help this effort along greatly, but it is not the only thing you need to consider. There are several other components that must go into a successful branding effort to make it pay off.

INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL BRANDING

Bloggging and other marketing efforts can build up the hype behind a brand and really get people talking about products and services, but more is needed to make this kind of effort pay off. To establish the kind of trust that is required to create a positive reaction in clients or customers, the products or services behind your line must also offer:

- **Quality** – Branding builds recognition for a product, but that product must still have the quality needed to impress customers. You simply cannot gain positive brand recognition unless your products and services offer the kind of quality needed to elicit trust in your customers.
- **Excellent service** – Customer service is everything in business and has been for a long time. When building a brand, customer service can boost word-of-mouth advertising. This, in turn, boosts referrals and helps a brand grow even more. Even in businesses where no product or service is sold directly, such as blogging for a living, customer service still matters. People will trust the authority of a blog if posts are written with authority and integrity. These

things can also be built upon with timely and well thought out responses to comments from readers.

- **Value** – This is a big buzz word with customers these days. If your product or service comes at a price, make sure buyers get the value they are after. Value doesn't mean "cheap;" it means quality for the price point. Even free blogs that host advertising can have "value." In this case, the information shared needs to be accurate, informative or entertaining. In short, readers need to feel like they haven't wasted their time by visiting.

Branding simply builds on all the key ingredients in a successful business and puts them in a package customers can readily identify. When you offer solid service, high quality and value, your products will begin to speak for themselves. New products or services will be more likely to have instant footing in the market simply because of the brand. In short, branding enables you to build on previous successes to grow your customer base and launch new offerings more effectively.

BLOGGING IS JUST 1 PRONG IN A CAMPAIGN

While blogging is a highly viable and important piece of the branding puzzle, it is not the only component that should go into an overall campaign. Beyond the written support found in a blog, a solid effort to create a brand presence may also include such things as:

- The use of an identifiable logo to create a visible brand
- The use of the brand logo in any/all advertising efforts, including print and television
- The use of the brand name in sponsorships and contests to generate a buzz and a sense of good will toward customers
- The use of a brand logo on letter head, business cards and other written materials

When the desire is present to build a strong branding campaign, the use of brand identifiers should be widespread. The more the company, product or service logo is seen by the public, the better.

Branding can help take a good product and the company that puts it out and turn it into a household name. The creation of a well-designed blog can boost efforts greatly and give a company an avenue for getting the brand name out to the public on a regular basis. When this format is used

to its full advantage, it can help catapult a brand while developing a rapport with readers.

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JUST WHAT IS A BLOG ANYWAY

Blog is a funny word that only recently came into existence thanks to the Internet revolution. The word itself is technically a shortened version of "Web log." While blogs can take on many forms and may adopt a variety of writing styles, they are essentially written communications vehicles that exist on the Internet. Unlike other forms of written communication that are limited in reach by print runs, blogs have a nearly limitless potential for reaching visitors or readers.

Although blogs exist on the Internet as a "Web site," they are different from standard sites. Whereas a typical corporate Web site will have content that remains mostly static – a home page, an "about us" section and so on – blogs are fluid and ever-changing. As new entries, or posts, are added to blogs their front pages and even the very images on them change frequently. The fluidity of blogs invites the potential for more traffic (greater exposure) and also for repeat visits (a greater chance to sell).

While blogs can vary greatly in formatting and appearances, there are some traits that tend to make this style of online communication recognizable.

TRAITS THAT DISTINGUISH BLOGS

While not every blog is alike, most share a few common threads that help distinguish them from other Web sites on the Internet. Some of the basic features found in many blogs include:

- **Short posts** – Blogs are not generally designed to accommodate long posts. In most cases, blog entries run between 200 and 1,000 words. This makes them fairly easy to update and provides readers with information in a quick fashion.
- **Frequent updates** – Well-run blogs tend to contain a lot of content (articles or posts). These posts are updated regularly to give visitors reasons to keep coming back for more.
- **Conversational style** – While some blogs are written in a more formal, newsy manner, this format is ideal for the conversational

style, as well. In branding, the conversational style can greatly help build a feeling of direct communication with readers (customers), which can help build a sense of loyalty and a connection.

- **Commenting ability** – Not every blog enables readers to post comments and ask questions of writers, but many do. For branding efforts, this can prove quite valuable. When comments are enabled, readers and the branding company can open up two-way dialogue, which can prove extremely useful for developing rapport.

OTHER FEATURES FOUND IN BLOGS

Blogs can vary greatly in specific style and inclusion of special features. They may, for example, exist on their own, separate from a corporate Web site. They may also be found attached to or even built within a corporate site. Other features that can help make them more appealing for readers and useful for branding efforts include:

- **Photo images** – Full color images are often used to support individual posts. These can be especially helpful when working on a branding effort. When the products and/or services in question are put out on the Internet in full color, recognition for the brand can grow.
- **Videos** – It is not at all uncommon for videos to also be used within the blog format. In branding, videos may be used to show off a product or service or even demonstrate how it is used.
- **Forums** – This takes standard blog comments sections to the next level. Rather than limiting communications to small fields, an auxiliary forum can promote an even more open exchange of information.
- **Auxiliary newsletters** – Some blogs are supported by the creation of auxiliary newsletters that are e-mailed directly to visitors who subscribe. The inclusion of a newsletter signup on a blog is an excellent way for a company to gain its own preauthorized e-mailing list. It is also excellent for backing up branding efforts with one more communications tool that is affordable.

There is no set-in-stone format for what a blog should be or must be. That's part of the beauty of this type of vehicle. Companies, organizations or individuals who are working on branding efforts are perfectly free to customize their creation to fit their own specific strengths and needs. This makes the tool extremely flexible and appropriate for just about any type of branding effort.

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WHO CAN BENEFIT FROM BLOGGING?

Blogs are extremely flexible and have the potential to be so effective that there really isn't a business out there that cannot benefit from the use of this vehicle. In fact, for some people, blogging is actually their paying business. This tool can add onto branding efforts no matter the product, service or idea that is in the spotlight. The blog itself can even be the "brand" in question.

Some examples that show just how versatile blogging can be in building a brand and cultivating business interests include:

- **Product blogs** – Blogs that are designed to promote a specific company and its products might contain news about upcoming releases, how present products are used and other related tidbits of information.
- **Service blogs** – Companies that sell services rather than specific products often use blogs to share information about their industry, to share tips on how to tell when a service call is needed and so on.
- **Professional blogs** – Doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professionals use blogs to get their names out on the Internet and to share vital information with readers. A doctor, for example, might write posts about maintaining health, how to tell if someone is sick and what to expect from certain treatments. This type of blog builds on the professional's own brand.
- **Government blogs** – Many governmental agencies on the city, county, state and federal levels now use blogs to impart important information to citizens. These blogs can range from highly newsy and formal in style to very conversational. The idea is to create an outlet to quickly and effectively share news and information with residents.
- **Artistic blogs** – Published authors, journalists, artists, musicians and others in the creative fields use blogs to boost their own brand recognition. They often use these vehicles to update fans on their current projects, to share personal news and more.
- **Niche blogs** – In some cases, the brand is the blog itself. Some entrepreneurs create blogs geared to a specific topic and build

themselves up as authorities on the said topic. To generate income, they sell advertising on their blogs or act as affiliate marketers for products related to the niche. The better the branding efforts here, the more likely it is the blog will be able to establish itself as a reliable authority on the subject matter. This, in turn, can build the brand and traffic on the site at the same time. When these two things happen, advertising or affiliate revenues can go up thanks to the exposure received.

- **Organizational blogs** – Many nonprofit organizations now use blogs to connect with their supporters. These blogs might contain information about fundraising efforts, public appearances, current public service campaigns and more. Blogs have proven very effective for helping build the brand recognition of different nonprofit organizations while also assisting them in gaining support and even reaching out to clients they service.

The beauty of blogs is that they can be used in a variety of ways to reach out to readers and build and maintain a following. The exposure gained through this format can prove to be a very powerful force in building a brand and the business behind it.

HOW THE EXPOSURE CAN PAY OFF

Do not underestimate the power a blog can have for building the recognition of a particular brand. When a blog becomes a force on the Internet within its own specific niche, traffic numbers can go through the ceiling. Keep in mind that traffic on a Web site is similar to customers walking in through a front door – some will purchase products and services. The more traffic obtained, the more likely it is success will follow.

When a blog is successful, ranks high with the search engines and garners a lot of traffic, it can pay off by:

- **Building brand name recognition** – The more visitors a blog pulls in, the more people around the globe will hear about a particular brand. When this exposure is coupled with a solid product, service or company and other branding efforts, people will become more familiar with the brand and more comfortable with it.
- **Creating a buzz for a brand or product** – The exposure gained from blogging can get people talking about a specific brand. This builds word-of-mouth advertising and can greatly impact the number of customers a company receives.

- **Increasing direct sales** – When blogging efforts pique client interest, the real results can show up in the bottom line. The more a brand is understood and talked about, the more likely it is people will trust the brand's products enough to purchase whatever is being sold. Whether your company sells cereal, offers a service or simply writes a blog as an authority on a specific topic and generates revenue from advertising on the blog, exposure can result in bottom line growth.

THE ADVANTAGES OF BLOGGING

Blogging might not be the only way to get the word out about a brand, but it does have its advantages. Whether it is used on its own or, more appropriately, as part of a multipronged branding campaign, this format does have its share of advantages. Unlike other forms of advertising to build brand recognition, blogs tend to be:

- **Highly affordable** – Launching a blog is something that can literally be done on a shoestring budget. It costs next to nothing to establish an effective blog. While it is certainly feasible to put a sizeable investment into the effort by hiring pros for design and writing, these expenses are not necessarily required. Pros can make blogs and the sites they are built on look and present better, but costs can be kept down through a do-it-yourself job when necessary.
- **Popular** – The short, to-the-point format of most blogs makes them highly popular with readers all over the globe. The credibility of some blogs as authorities on their specific topics is helping this format gain greatly in popularity. Consider how many blogs are now spotlighted in the news and the growth in popularity will become evident.
- **Very flexible** – While companies and organizations might have (and probably should have) style guidelines for their blogs, the format remains highly flexible. This is a creative outlet for reaching out, creating brand recognition and communicating with readers.
- **Easy to update** – The relatively loose style makes it fairly easy to keep a blog updated. It is not necessary to have highly polished, multipage posts put online every day to reap the rewards of blogging. Even a short post of 200 or 300 words can be useful for updating a blog and ensuring its content is fresh. While quality pieces are essential, they do not have to take up a tremendous amount of time to produce.
- **Fun** – Maintaining a blog and learning to use the tool to capture an audience is actually a fun undertaking. This is one of the most enjoyable ways to reach out and connect personally with clients and potential clients.

Blogging is an effective, low-cost way to gain attention for a particular brand. The audience on the Internet is potentially endless as more people get online and it stretches well across international boundaries. This means companies can reach out and literally grow their businesses on a global level using this high-tech, low-dollar tool.

The versatility of blogs makes them perfect for any branding campaign. From international corporations to individuals working on at-home businesses, blogs are fast becoming a highly prized vehicle for communicating brand messages and building relationships with clients. To truly tap into the potential power a blog has for supporting branding efforts, the first step involves creating the platform.

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GETTING ONE SET UP

Now that you know what a blog can do for marketing efforts, chances are getting one set up is sounding very appealing to you right about now. The process involved in establishing a branding blog is pretty straightforward. It does require a little bit of technical savvy, but in most cases, individuals can launch their own blogs without too much effort.

It is also possible to hire professional programmers, designers and writers to launch a blog and create its format. This option is often selected by companies that are after a 100 percent professional looking presentation. Don't worry though; you do not technically have to hire pros to get the job done right. Most blogging programs available on the Internet will walk you through their own distinct process for creating a blog. Just follow the instructions carefully and you can be online in no time.

As you work on setting up your blog, you will have to make a number of decisions along the way. The first will involve selecting the program to go with for hosting the blog itself. Blog programs do vary, but most provide the basic tools you need for writing and editing your posts and publishing them online. In most cases, blog programs will also host your pages on the Internet if you do not already have a Web site in which to include a blog presentation. Should you have a Web site in place, you can add the blog as a plug in and use your own Web site address to direct readers to your pages. This means you'll use the blog program to write and format your posts, but they will technically publish directly to your existing Web site.

COMMON PROGRAMMING OPTIONS

There are a number of different programs available on the Internet that enable people to easily and automatically set up their own blogs. These programs are typically offered for free or at a low-cost charge. The technical savvy behind these programs is so high, in fact, that many professional programmers use them instead of reinventing the wheel when a customer wants a blog built into a company Web site.

Some of the more common blogging programs available include:

- **Blogger** – Located online at www.blogger.com, this is Google's own vehicle for blogging. This program is offered free of charge and is

even equipped to easily accept paid ads from Google. It provides bloggers the ability to design their own blogs and supports a number of add ins like photos and videos. Because of its flexibility, it is often selected by professionals to serve as the “back end” program for a custom designed Web site that has a built in blog.

- **Word Press** – Located online at www.wordpress.org, this is an independent blogging program offered free of charge. It also offers a lot of bells and whistles that other programs may not and does adapt to enable users to fully customize their blog appearance. Like Blogger, Word Press does work extremely well as a back end program included in the makeup of a professional site. The flexibility of this particular program has made it very popular with pros. This is the blogging tool used by such companies as Yahoo! and The New York Times.
- **Others** – There are many other blogging programs available on their own or offered directly by Web hosting companies. Most Web hosting companies, in fact, offer the ability to “plug in” a blog during the design phase of a personal or business Web site. Some companies make sure their Web site design programs specifically support Blogger or Word Press. Others provide their users with different programs, which offer similar functions.

GETTING A WEB ADDRESS FOR A BLOG

Once a blogging program is selected, a home must be created for it on the Internet. There are two major options here. They are:

- **Using the assigned name from the blogging program** – Most blogging programs will assign a URL or Web address to a new blog at no cost. This is a great way to get started with a trial blog, but the option does have some disadvantages. The URLs of blogs completely housed within the blogging program’s servers tend to be extremely long. This can make it very difficult for readers to find your blog again, which is bad for branding efforts.
- **Creating your own Web site to host the blog** – This is a more time consuming option, but it does provide a way for you to have your blog reside on a URL of your choosing. In this case, you would create your own Web site and use the blog as a plug in on it. Most Web hosting companies can walk you through the necessary steps to make it happen. When this option is exercised, your URL might be www.YourCompanyName.com. The advantage is a shorter, easier to remember address for readers to find. This also lends itself much better to other branding and marketing efforts. Basically, a cleaner, shorter Web site address is simply easier for people to remember and it can be particularly beneficial if the brand name is used in the address. It’s just one more way to get your brand name out to the public.

Selecting a program to use and where to house your blog on the Internet is only the first part of the job. To be able to publish a blog for branding, you are going to have to build the site. Again, you can choose to do the job yourself or you can hire a firm to do the work. Let's look at both options more closely.

DOING IT YOURSELF

If you decide to create your own blog and/or Web site, you can. Today's Web hosting and blog hosting companies have made it very easy for beginners to create their own sites from the ground up. Many, in fact, offer their own easy-to-use design programs that take care of all the technical programming. All you have to do is follow the instructions offered to build and launch your site or blog.

The basic steps involved in building a blog yourself include:

- Selecting the hosting company
- Deciding whether to write a freestanding blog or to include it on a separate Web site
- Picking the URL
- Following the instructions offered to build the blog and possibly the Web site
- Populating the blog with some starting content
- Publishing

Mapping out, building and populating a blog without any professional assistance is a cost-effective way to go. It can be done even by those with minimal technical savvy thanks to the intuitiveness of many of the programs available for use. There are, however, some advantages to calling in pros to assist with the launch.

HIRING A PRO

If the idea of planning out, designing and publishing a blog meant to help brand your products or services overwhelms, relax. There are professionals who deal specifically with the creation of blogs. Some of the options out there to help you include:

- **Full service companies** – There are companies available that can build a Web site and a blog for you from your specifications. They can also assist with optimizing a blog for the search engines and may also work with you to map out a plan for content. Full-service companies tend to have designers, programmers and writers on

staff or available to put professional projects together with expediency and skill.

- **Design firms** – If you don't need or want help with the writing, but want a professional presentation, a Web design company can help you on the technical and visual aspects.
- **Writers** – If you don't need assistance with actually building your branding blog, but you want help with writing, there are professionals who can assist. Professional writers can help you populate your blog with search engine optimized posts relevant to your niche. This is an option not only for establishing your blog, but also for maintaining it down the road.

Hiring professionals to produce a new blog and supporting Web site can be costly undertaking depending on who is hired. If reputable professionals are called in, however, there are some advantages that cannot be disputed. When experienced pros work with you to create a branding blog, chances are you will enjoy:

- A more visually appealing blog, which can be important for gaining repeat traffic
- Better positioning with the search engines
- More functional features and add ins that can make your blog and/or Web site more user friendly

TIPS FOR HIRING PROS

There are some incredible professionals available to work on blogs and Web sites. Unfortunately, not all pros or companies they work for deliver what customers would like. To increase your odds of hiring the best, it is important to do a little research before making a decision on whom to go with. Some of the things to consider when hiring include:

- **Pricing** – Do have a target budget in mind when hiring a firm to help out with the creation of your blog. Keep in mind what you want the pros to do when you set your budget. If you only need a few starter posts from a writer, your budget doesn't have to be large. Should you require a complete design job, programming and writing, plan on spending a fair amount of money. Skilled professionals will generally cost you a premium rate. While "budget" pros are out there, be careful when cutting corners if you are truly trying to create a professional presentation.
- **Experience** – Ideally, you want pros that have been in the business for a while and are very experienced with a variety of design and blogging programs. Pay attention to resumes here and look for companies or individuals who really know their stuff.

- **Reputation** – There are pros that promise the moon and stars and fail to deliver. Look into reputations and go with those who have customers that truly praise their work. Also pay attention to previous jobs performed to find professionals who have the kind of style you are after. If a pro has built 100 blogs and you only like the looks and functionality of two, chances are that's not the pro for you.

Whether you hire a pro or go it alone, building the blog is only the first step in using this tool to your branding advantage. The message and overall theme of your blog will also impact your efforts greatly. You need to have a solid understanding of your target audience. You will also need to map out a content plan to guide yourself as you start to populate your blog with posts. If branding is truly your aim, you want to make sure content supports your mission and casts your brand in a positive light.

6

MESSAGE IS EVERYTHING

Building a blog isn't enough to have it work into your branding plans. To really make it do its job, you have to set a plan into action for populating it with content. Ideally, this content will support your branding efforts while pulling in traffic from the Internet. As we've already said, traffic (readers) can equate to increased business for you. This means your plan needs to be solid and your content must appeal to your target audience.

Before you can set the tone and establish guidelines for your content, you will need to identify your target audience and brainstorm what types of material will best appeal to them. Once you have ideas in place, you'll also want to consider how best to gain attention from the search engines. Using the right Search Engine Optimization techniques can pay off here with traffic and exposure elsewhere on the Internet.

KNOW YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

Who is your target audience?

This might be the most important question facing you as you move forward with plans build your brand through blogging. If you don't know who your likely readers are, you will not be able to tailor content to pull them in and keep them coming back.

There are a number of things you can do to determine your target audience. If you have the funding, you can hire a market research company to assist in generating demographical information as it relates to your brand and its products or services. If you can't afford market research, you can ask yourself these questions to focus your efforts better:

- **Who are my products for?** – If you are trying to build a brand name for baby care products, chances are you already know your target audience. You want to pull in young mothers and fathers and perhaps grandparents. Your blog posts will need to appeal to them and will need to offer them information and even advice they can use.

- **Who would I like my products to also appeal to?** – Going back to those baby products, perhaps you have a great customer base of parents already, but would like to increase sales through grandparents and friends. In this case, your target audience would also include these people. That means you'd want to make sure your message and posts appeal to them, as well.
- **Am I going after an unusual niche?** – Maybe you don't sell products at all, but want your brand blog to appeal to a specific kind of reader. If, for example, you're a woodworker and your blog will be about this niche topic, you'll want to set your message to appeal to beginners, novices and even pros involved in this hobby.

Once you have a good idea of who your blog will target, it can help you better plan content and style guidelines. These are important for assisting you in selecting and/or creating content that not only builds your brand, but also appeals to your desired audience.

TIPS FOR SETTING THE TONE AND STYLE

Having a basic outline of what can and cannot appear on your branding blog is very useful. You want to make sure posts are consistent and build up the brand while sending the right messages out to your target audience.

Some of the things to consider including in your guidelines are:

- **The basic writing style** – Do you want your blog to be highly informal and conversational? Perhaps you'd like to create a news blog and establish yourself as an authority on a specific topic? You do have freedom in determining the writing style, but keep your goals and your target audience in mind when doing so. Once you select a style, try to stick with it so your readers know what to expect when they visit your blog.
- **The types of posts you'd like to appear on your blog** – With your target audience in mind, brainstorm a list of the kinds of posts that would be acceptable and those that might not be. If you're selling baby products, you might want posts about your products, baby care in general and even health care. Related posts about how mothers can better care for themselves could also fit in quite well. You might not, however, want content that deals with raising teenagers. Keep your focus area fairly tight and you can establish your brand and your credibility much easier.
- **The "rating" of your blog** – Will your target audience be mostly adult or is it likely that children will also visit your site? Keep this in mind when setting the "rating" for your content. If your branding efforts are meant to sell certain products that might appeal to an

entire family, you'll want think G or PG in regard to ratings. If you happen to sell racy, intimate products or you're building a branded news site related to adult topics, a punchier R rating might be more in order in regard to content and style of writing. Again, it is very useful to define your target audience first and set content guidelines accordingly.

When you know your audience and focus your content toward your desired readers, you will be well on your way to creating and selecting content that serves your purposes perfectly. Still, you are going to need to know how to reach out and pull in visitors. Search Engine Optimization can help out immensely here.

THE ABCS OF SEO

Search Engine Optimization, or SEO, for short involves manipulating the content on a Web site to work search engines like Google and Yahoo to your advantage. When people use search engines, they type in keywords and keyword phrases. These queries result in the search engines delivering a listing of sites that best fit the terms the users typed in. Ideally, you want your blog to show up high on that list when terms related to your niche are punched in by potential readers.

To make this happen, your blog will need to target specific keywords and phrases related to your niche. You'll want to use these words and phrases frequently, but logically, within your content, on metatags, photos and more. You won't want to go overboard and "stuff" keywords into content, but you will want to make the best use of words and phrases that are related to your niche.

SELECTING THE RIGHT WORDS

Choosing keywords to build a blog around isn't as difficult as it sounds. Search engines like Google even have programs that can help you select words and phrases that are commonly used by searchers to find information and products related to your niche. If you'd like a lower tech way to go, you can even sit down with a pad and pen and just brainstorm words that fit in with what you do and who you are trying to reach.

To target your use of keywords on your blog, consider such things as:

- **What you do** – If your blog will be dedicated to selling a particular product, you'll want to rank high for the brand name, of course. You'll also want terms related to it. If you sell baby blankets, for example, consider words related to your products that go beyond

the brand name. "Custom baby blankets," "crib linens," "baby bedding" and so on might be terms worked into your content on a regular basis.

- **Geographical cues** – Sometimes it can pay to use geographical cues within SEO efforts. If you're a doctor in New York, for example, chances are you want to pull in highly targeted readers. While you might not mind visitors from California, your business would benefit more from visitors from your home state or city. With this in mind, temper your keywords with geographical cues when possible. If you are a dentist in Queens, you might want to attract readers who are looking for "Queens dental offices" or "Queens dental experts." If this is the case, use these terms in your post to boost your rankings.

When picking terms for SEO purposes, it is often best to have a fairly decent sized list to work with. If it's your plan to update your blog daily, working only with "custom baby blankets" can become highly repetitive too quickly. Just create a well defined list and work the chosen words into content as much as possible without losing the clarity of your posts.

WHY SEO MATTERS

Taking the time to work a SEO plan into your blogging content is an extra step you probably didn't count on. It can, however, greatly boost your branding efforts and help launch your site off on the path to success. There are a number of reasons why it pays to consider SEO in your overall branding and blog marketing plan. They include:

- **The potential traffic** – Search engines do provide an outlet for free advertising. When you manage to rank high for your selected search terms, you'll gain traffic, which can increase your branding success and even your sales.
- **The targeted nature of the traffic** – When people visit your site, you want them to be interested in what you have to offer. It doesn't matter whether it's a product, service or just information. If your visitors arrive from searches related to your niche, they will be more likely to be interested in what you have to sell or say.
- **The pre-sell factor** – If a visitor finds your blog because he typed in "toothbrushes for sale" and that's your business, that visitor is already in a buying frame of mind. This can translate to a near instant sale if your products suit his needs.
- **Linking** – When you rank high with the search engines, your blog can gain increased publicity from other sites on the Internet. The

more credibility and ranking you gain, the more likely it is other sites will quote yours and refer to it. This can help you increase your branding efforts and enable you to gain even more free recognition for what you are attempting to do.

CONTENT PITFALLS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Maintaining a blog can take some effort and it is easy to fall into some traps that can hurt your search engine rankings and even your brand image. Some of the potential pitfalls to watch out for include:

- **Keyword stuffing** – Keywords and phrases are very important for gaining recognition from the search engines. They do not, however, trump the need for quality in your content. Use keywords where they naturally fit into content, but don't force them.
- **Posting for the sake of doing so** – Remember, you are trying to build up a brand image. This means you want to truly appeal to visitors. The best way to do this is to offer content that will be of interest. Don't just put anything out there in hopes you'll pull in traffic. Take the time to consider unique and interesting posts. It's better to skip a few days if you must than to just post for the sake of doing so.
- **Duplicating content** – Refrain from posting the same thing over and over again. Duplicate pages will be spotted by frequent visitors and they can hurt you in regard to search engine rankings.
- **"Borrowing" content** – While it is acceptable to quote other sources in your content, don't just borrow it without giving credit where it is due. When you quote another site and give credit this creates a link to the original site, which is important. We'll discuss the reasons for this shortly.

Once you have put together a rough plan for your posts, the search engine terms you'll use and your message, you'll need to start populating your blog with content. The maintenance of a blog can make or break its effectiveness in helping with overall branding efforts.

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MAINTAINING YOUR BLOG

Now that you have a blog, you have to come up with a plan to keep it maintained. When you're trying to build a blog up to boost branding efforts, the maintenance of the blog will matter a great deal. To pull in traffic and turn a casual visitor into a customer or a frequent visitor, you'll need to offer things they want to see, read about or can actually use.

Maintaining a blog does take some work, but it can be a rather fun process. The more useful and frequent entries are, the more likely it is you will be able to develop a following and a rapport with visitors.

While there is no set formula for how often a blog needs to be updated, frequency can prove to be important for gaining rankings and traffic.

OPTIONS FOR MAINTAINING YOUR BLOG

While many people choose to build and maintain their own blogs, this is not the only option available for you. Keep in mind that "content" doesn't always have to mean a written post either. Images and videos can also serve well here and assist in keeping a blog looking fresh.

Some of the avenues you can take to ensure your blog is updated on a regular basis include:

- **Using inside writers** – You can write your own posts or have people within your company contribute. Depending on the size of your company, you can spread the responsibilities to different staff members that might be able to help with content that will assist in building up the brand. For a corporate brand, for example, the marketing department might write the majority of posts. Their posts, however, can be complemented with articles written by product developers, the CEO, engineers and so on.
- **Hiring professionals** – Depending on the niche topic your blog will focus on it is possible professional writers can be hired to add updates. These writers might post about their own experiences with the niche or your product. They might also keep the blog fresh with interesting industry related news and events. Professional companies and solo freelancers can add a new perspective to a blog

that helps to build branding efforts while making posts more varied and interesting.

- **Using guest writers** – It is also possible to ask other niche-related industry professionals to write posts for a blog. Guest posts are an excellent way to vary content and keep it fresh and interesting. This technique works very well for certain products, news blogs and other similar pursuits.

THINK MULTIMEDIA

Blog content does typically center on the written word, but visuals can also make a huge impact. To make sure your blog supports your branding efforts and is also appealing, be sure to include a variety of different presentations.

Some of the options here include:

- **Photographs** – It's not a bad idea to include an image with every post or nearly every post. If you're writing about how your baby blankets are hand-knitted, show an image of one being created. If your blog focuses on horror movie news, be sure to include publicity shots that relate to a particular film you are discussing. Photographic images can support your content and pull readers in for a closer look.
- **Videos** – Creating videos to support posts or to be used in place of a standard post is also a great way to go. Videos might explain how to use products, show how they are made, demonstrate related accessories and so on. If you're blogging to create a branded news site, consider using footage related to your posts.
- **Audio** – Podcasts and other audio pieces can vary the content on a site and make it more appealing to visitors.

It is not necessary to use multimedia presentations for every post or even very often. Occasional use, however, can really add value to your content. These additions can also be used on their own in place of posts, which will help you create a more fluid site. Remember, readers are more likely to return frequently if they A.) like what they see, and B.) know content will be fresh and new when they visit again.

FREQUENCY OF POSTS MATTERS

Imagine picking up a newspaper and reading the exact same stories that appeared yesterday. You wouldn't be happy. Chances are you'd never buy that newspaper again. The same idea holds true – almost – for blogs. Readers like to see new content on a regular basis. This gives them something to look forward to and it can also help with your branding efforts.

There is no particular rule on how often a blog should be updated. If you are working on gaining credibility for your blog and your brand, more is often better. It is frequently recommended that updates go into a blog between three to five times weekly. It is also best to make sure the updates are spread throughout the course of several days each week.

When posts are updated frequently, your branding efforts will benefit because:

- Frequent posting can help with increasing the keyword density on your blog
- Your search engine rankings can go up
- You give visitors more reasons to return
- You provide more points of entry into your blog so people can learn about your brand
- You give yourself more of an ability to establish your blog as an authority on the subject matter
- You increase your chances of having content that others will want to quote and link to, which can increase your traffic

Launching your blog and putting some content on it is not enough to really help with branding efforts. To get the greatest benefit from the project, you do need to pay attention to updates and make sure your content is relevant to the topic, useful or enjoyable to readers and fresh.

While you can build traffic on your blog through SEO techniques alone, it does make sense to also employ some forms of advertising. This is especially so if you are trying to build a brand name. When you first start out people will not know to turn to your blog for information unless you tell them to. This is where a supporting marketing plan can really benefit your efforts.

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GETTING THE WORD OUT

Building a blog and putting great content on it is not necessarily enough to get people to visit. To ensure a steady stream of traffic as you're adding useful content and creating a site that people want to visit will require a marketing plan. Remember, as you build your brand, you want visitors to read what you have to say and to keep coming back for more.

The question is: How can you generate a buzz for your blog? When you are trying to create interest in a blog or even a standard Web site for that matter, you have a number of options at your disposal. Some will cost money, but a few are completely free and grassroots in nature. The options include:

- SEO, pay-per-click ads
- Incoming links
- Full advertising flights
- Affiliate marketing
- Giveaways and contests

Let's take a look at each of these options and how they can help you build traffic for your blog and keep the numbers high.

PAY-PER-CLICK ADS TARGET READERS

Pay-per-click advertising is a form of online advertising that is typically offered by such search engine companies as Google and Yahoo. When you select this vehicle for advertising, your ads will appear on sites that are related to your niche. Essentially, ads appear on a site based on that site's own keywords. If you sell baby blankets and blog about the process, your ads might appear on a Web site dedicated to parenting in general, for example.

Pay-per-click, SEO advertising can be very useful for building traffic. These ads offer quite a few advantages, including:

- **The cost** – Pay-per-click campaigns only cost you money when readers on another site "click" through to your blog. This means if the ads don't work, you don't necessarily have to pay for anything.

- **They develop targeted traffic** – If your ads appear on a parenting Web site, for example, the visits they generate will typically come from people who are already interested in learning more about your baby blankets.
- **They are easy to establish** – Companies that offer pay-per-click advertising make it very easy to get a campaign started. Google, for example, will walk you through the entire process and even teach you how to word your ads for maximum effectiveness.

INCOMING LINKS CAN BOOST NUMBERS

As you build up the content on your blog, one of the best forms of advertising is completely free. When other bloggers or Web site owners quote and link to your content, you gain free exposure. While it is possible to ask other site owners to link to your content, the most effective means of gaining this type of exposure is to actually have posts people want to link to.

The advantages of incoming links to your blog and its posts include:

- **Free exposure** – When another Web site sees your content and wants to reference it, you gain exposure to that site's visitors. This can be incredible for your own traffic numbers and doesn't cost you a dime in the process.
- **Credibility increases** – The more sites that link to your content, the better your credibility is likely to be. When others start seeing your blog as an authority on a subject, your brand name will gain exposure and its reputation will only benefit.
- **Ranking increases** – Search engine ranking does involve more than the use of SEO. Many search engine companies like Google also pay attention to the credibility of blogs and Web sites when formulating their rankings. The more incoming links your blog has from sites that rank high, the better your rankings are likely to become. When you manage to combine a careful SEO campaign with efforts to establish your brand and its supporting blog's credibility, the more likely it is you will rank high as an authority site on your chosen topic.

On the Internet, incoming links to your site are sort of like word-of-mouth advertising in the real world. The more positive links you have, the better the buzz about your brand is likely to be.

FULL ADVERTISING FLIGHTS

While you may not want to pay out money to gain advertising and interest in your blog, it is sometimes well worth the investment. If you are building a branding campaign for a company or a specific product, it can pay to look into more traditional means of advertising, as well. There are companies that specialize in advertising campaigns that may include both online ads and those in newspapers, radio and television. Depending on your goals for the brand and your budgeting, these campaigns can be well worth the expense.

A full advertising flight that includes both online and offline components can be beneficial for your efforts because of its:

- **Potential reach** – If it is your desire to reach a lot of people quickly, going both online and offline with advertising for your brand and blog can work extremely well. A single multipronged campaign might be able to reach more people in a few days than you'd be able to reach in weeks or months using more passive modes of advertising.
- **Demographic targeting** – Companies that specialize in both online and offline advertising tend to also be quite adept at targeting specific demographics. If you are trying to pull in 20-something parents and 70-something grandparents to read about your baby blankets, advertising pros will know how to make this happen.
- **Value** – When an advertising flight works as expected, its potential value to your branding efforts can prove priceless. The customers reached in a single campaign can turn into repeat visitors (customers) and they can help you create further buzz through word-of-mouth advertising.

AFFILIATE MARKETING HAS ITS PERKS

While this form of advertising won't work for every brand effort out there, it can be very useful if you are trying to promote particular products or services. Affiliate marketing works by having others act as your salespeople on the Internet. Affiliates advertise your blog and your products on their own Web sites and gain a percentage for each successful sale made through their referrals.

Affiliate marketing is similar to pay-per-click advertising, but it can create an even bigger buzz for your products or services. Affiliates, for example, often gear their own Web sites to pre-sell the products or services they represent. This can have a snowball effect that's positive for your brand and even more positive for your bottom line – even considering the percentage you might have to pay affiliates for successful sales.

GIVEAWAYS AND CONTESTS

There is no denying the fact that people love freebies. This is especially so online. If you want to generate a lot of interest in your blog and the brand you are trying to develop, running periodic contests and offering giveaways can be incredibly useful. Contests can include chances to win the products or services you are branding. Giveaways might include "starter" products or even free eBooks and other tools readers might be interested in.

The benefits of using giveaways and contests to promote your brand and your blog include:

- The buzz they generate
- The chance to gain new visitors (customers) who might not have otherwise taken the time to look at your blog or even your brand
- The free advertising that can be created – other Web sites and blogs will often write about contests and giveaways that might be of interest to their own readers
- The chance to develop loyalty among visitors who take the time to check out your products or services

When your intent is to build a brand through a blog or any other means, advertising is important. Consider some of the bigger brands out there and pay attention to how much they actually put into advertising. Even companies that have reached the "household name" status still put a lot of time, energy and money into advertising well after they've been established. This is to help ensure that that their brand name remains in the forefront of customers' minds and that new customers are constantly gained.

While you might have budgetary constraints, do try to use a multipronged approach for advertising. The more places you can get your brand name advertised, the better. If money is a concern, focus on cultivating free advertising options such as basic SEO, word of mouth and incoming links. Should money not be an issue, a combination of free and paid advertising techniques can help build brand recognition and ultimately help you succeed in your efforts.

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A FEW WORDS IN PARTING

No matter what type of business you are in, building a brand name does take some effort and dedication. A blog can serve as a very useful tool for helping to build recognition for a brand and to promote a greater sense of loyalty among customers.

When a blog is created specifically to boost brand name recognition for a product or service – or even if the blog is the brand being promoted – you will want to put some thought into the launching and maintenance of this vehicle. A well-maintained blog can help you increase interest in your brand while also raising its credibility level.

To get the most out of your blog, remember to:

- **Create a functional, attractive format** – You want your blog to be easy and enjoyable to read. If visitors have a hard time reading the text or navigating the site, they may not return.
- **Send a clear message** – Select guidelines for your entries and pick a base style to follow. This will help readers know what to expect when they make return visits.
- **Give visitors value** – Make sure your entries relate to your branding niche and offer readers something of value such as useful information, entertainment or even news they might be interested in.
- **Keep the site updated** – Blogs are meant to be consistently updated. Try to make sure your site is fluid and offers visitors plenty of reasons to refer it to their friends and to keep coming back for more personally.
- **Think visual** – Make sure to mix up your blog with text and images both. This adds impact to your blog and does appeal to visitors.
- **Get the word out** – Branding is a process that requires a lot of positive attention to pay off. Advertising in one form or another can be extremely important for the traffic numbers on your blog and the overall chances of success for your branding effort.

Blogging is an effective and excellent way to get the word out about a brand. When this format is used to its greatest potential, you can reach

out and literally tell people and show them why your brand is worth trusting. In turn, thanks to the two-way communication offered in the blog format, your followers can also add to your brand's credibility and help boost its reputation even more through their own contributions.