

BLOGGING 101

Introducing Blog Management into the Public Relations Curriculum

Richard D. Waters

rdwaters@ncsu.edu

North Carolina State University

Jennifer Robinson

jennifer.robinson@murdoch.edu.au

Murdoch University-Australia

The Weblog, or “blog” as it is more commonly known, is reshaping the traditional mediasphere. Blogs are playing an important role in educating, entertaining, and serving as legitimate news sources as the impact of new media continues to grow. A recent Pew Center Study found that nearly 30 percent of all Internet users regularly read blogs (Pew Center, 2005), and current estimates place the number of active blogs at more than eight million (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006).

As blogs continue to grow in their cultural significance, public relations practitioners need a solid understanding of the various roles that the blog serves. To offer clients a broader range of services, Edelman has hired top bloggers in advertising and public affairs, and a top public relations blogger joined the staff of Weber Shandwick’s San Francisco office (AdAge.com, 2006).

With the industry acknowledging the blog’s power, the question for academics looms: Where should students turn for lessons on blog management? In recent years, public relations students have been learning about online communication and incorporating strategy and tactics. Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) note that electronic information subsidies, such as Web sites, listservs, or e-newsletters, do not result in building relationships between an organization and its publics. To understand and appreciate the dialogic nature of blogs, students should be exposed to blogging in public relations courses.

A few public relations programs incorporate a blogging component, most notably Auburn University and *prblogs.com*; however, this is usually at the discretion of individual instructors and not as part of a curricular plan. Despite the numerous tactics already covered in the writing course, we propose that a combined approach to blog writing and management make blogs an appropriate choice for the writing course because of its emphasis on a relationship-building dialogue. Additionally, this paper discusses the usefulness of blog management as a dialogic tool in other courses in the existing public relations curriculum and offers a sample assignment.

Impact on Public Relations

The increase in organizational blogging is not surprising as blogs have a significantly stronger potential for relationship-building than traditional Web sites (Seltzer, 2005; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Scholars have longed for a method of moving beyond the traditional Web site to take advantage of its interactive nature (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). However, many see corporate Web sites as still mostly brochures (Searls & Weinberger, 2001).

For organizations looking to move beyond the traditional Web site, blogging offers the ability to facilitate an ongoing exchange of ideas with key stakeholders. Kent and Taylor (1998) note that the goal of this dialogue is not necessarily simple agreement; instead, it is a series of give and take discussions that are open and honest and designed to foster relationship growth.

Dialogic communication is the essence of two-way symmetrical communication. Long advocated as the most ethical communication style, blogs provide organizations with an opportunity to engage publics in a conversation. Though Grunig (2001) says that organizations have made considerable efforts in improving the nature of their communication, they have not yet truly become excellent or symmetrical. Taylor, Kent & White (2001) say that the blog provides the opportunity to achieve communication excellence.

As they note, “given the field’s shift to a more relational approach to public relations, the concept of dialogue may now best capture the process and product of relationship building” (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001, p. 265). However, managing an organization’s blog relationship with its Web-based publics also involves active listening.

An organization may have a blog on its Web site; however, the practitioner must also conduct environmental scanning on the Internet to see how it is being discussed on other blogs. Through subscription to referral services, organizations can monitor blog-based conversations about it, its policies and its actions.

In previous years, organizations that negated the impact of the blogosphere quickly changed their stance when it influenced the bottom line. Kryptonite, a manufacturer of high-quality locks for bicycles, found that its newest product was the topic of a highly visible blog in September 2004. The company’s new security features on its newest product were found to be vulnerable to a ballpoint pen. After an initial posting about the defect on *bikeforum.net* (Unaesthetic, 2004), the company announced that its locks were indeed safe and suggested that concerned owners could send their locks into the company to have them re-cored so the key was smaller than the dimensions of a ballpoint pen. The *New York Times* featured the story, and within a week more than seven million unique visitors read the original

The authors wish to thank Professor Mindy McAdams, University of Florida, for sharing her guidelines for teaching blogs in her online media class and her knowledge of the topic.

TPR submissions are accepted based upon editorial board evaluations of relevance to public relations education, importance to public relations teaching, quality of writing, manuscript organization, appropriateness of conclusions and teaching suggestions, and adequacy of the information, evidence or data presented. Papers selected for the PRD’s top teaching session at AEJMC’s national convention and meeting TPR’s publication guidelines can be published without further review if edited to a maximum of 3,000 words (including tables and endnotes). Authors of teaching papers selected for other PRD sessions are also encouraged to submit their papers electronically for the regular review process. For mail submissions, four hard copies of each manuscript must be submitted. Names of authors should not be listed on the manuscript itself. A detachable title page should include the author’s title, office address, telephone number, fax number and e-mail address. Final manuscript must be in a readable 9-point type or larger and total no more than 3,000 words, including tables and endnotes. Upon final acceptance of a manuscript, the author is expected to provide a plain text e-mail version to the *PR Update* editor. Back issues of TPR are available on the PRD website:

<http://lamar.colostate.edu/~aejmcpr>

TPR

Teaching Public Relations

MONOGRAPH 74

Summer 2008

Submissions should be sent to:

TPR EDITOR

Chuck Lubbers

University of South Dakota

605/677.6400 • 677.4250 (fax)

clubbers@usd.edu

Advising Editor: Ken Plowman,
Brigham Young University,
plowman@byu.edu

post. Ten days after the initial posting, Kryptonite announced a free product exchange for people who bought the lock.

In another high-profile example, Jeff Jarvis' "Dell Hell" blog received coverage by national media, more than 1,300 posts from different users, and twelve million unique visitors in the weeks that followed his critical message concerning Dell computers and the company's response to his call (Jarvis, 2005). Similarly, a blog exposing AOL's customer service with an audio recording had more than one thousand responded to his posting, and many had their own experiences with AOL customer service representatives to share (Vinny, 2006). CNN aired the story on "Showbiz Tonight," and it soon became one of the most popular free video streams on CNN.com.

Blogs have gone mainstream and organizations cannot afford to ignore blogs criticizing them. After the experience with Jarvis, Dell hired employees whose sole job it is to monitor the blogging landscape to see how the organization can work with the public to address their concerns. Sun Microsystems, Microsoft, Hewlett Packard and Disney are among the Fortune 500 companies that encourage their communication departments' employees to blog and monitor blogs concerning the company. Public relations firms have also hired bloggers for their clients to ensure they are capable of offering the most up-to-date in public relations and communication management. Given the prominence blogs are receiving in corporate communication departments, public relations students need to be exposed to the topic during their studies if they are to succeed in the new digital age.

Indeed, Richard Edelman confirmed the importance of learning to blog after a visit to Ball State University. Referring to the public relations curriculum, Edelman said "students need to blog and join conversations, not just to write for the newspaper and to create PR campaigns for local businesses. Faculty can lead the way by starting their own blogs . . . to discuss their projects and learnings" (Edelman, 2006).

The Importance of the Blogging Assignment

As public relations educators debate whether the best approach to advancing the profession is to focus on relationship development or strategic communication, blog management helps to bring both paradigms together. For professors seeking to educate about the power of strategic communication, blogs illustrate the importance of message design, blog construction, and the targeting of messages to active Internet publics. Similarly, the dialogue created by blogs allows those advocating relationship management to show how the Internet can be used for this purpose.

This assignment helps to familiarize students with different aspects of technology they will encounter in the workforce. In recent years, many educators have adapted the public relations writing course to include writing for Web sites and Web publishing. The time has come for the course to add blogging to the list of tactics covered in this course. Blogging requires that the student move beyond the traditional informational or promotional language that is often featured in fact sheets and news releases, respectively. While students are exposed to a more personalized tone when asked to write speeches or business letters in the writing course, they are not given the chance to develop the skills necessary for writing and maintaining blogs.

This assignment also helps students to specialize in an aspect of public relations that interests them. By concentrating their industry research on one particular topic—whether that is campaign evaluation or strategic planning—students have the ability to develop strengths that they can in turn use to help secure internships and their first career position.

Details of the Blogging Assignment

Because blog management is a task that is largely untouched by the public relations texts, it is important to offer a suggestion for how the tactic could be taught in the classroom. To manage a blog, students were required to register for and maintain a blog for ten weeks on an established Web site, such as blogger.com. The blog had to be related to the industry; however, students were allowed to choose any aspect of public relations that appealed to them. The ultimate goal of the assignment is to encourage students to develop their own skills and begin establishing specialized expertise in an interest area.

Students were given two options for the format of their blog: (1) If a student had a particular interest in public relations, such as fundraising or crisis communications, they were encouraged to discuss issues that pertained to those interest areas to become a specialist in that area; or (2) Students who wanted more structure to the blog assignment were given the option to start their initial postings based on other course material, such as a communication plan, news release, or any other tactic, and then extend the dialogue to how it impacts the industry during the six-week span.

During the first week, students simply had to establish and publish a welcoming message on the blog and send an e-mail with a hyperlink to the blog to the instructor. In the meantime, the instructor compiled a list of all the students' blogs and hyperlinks to share with the class at a later time—ideally in a blog format so that the instructor could provide credibility to the assignment. By serving as an example, professors can highlight how posts should be researched and written following the rules of AP Style, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

During the second week, students continued to explore the topic they had chosen by making another post on their own blog. However, to enhance the credibility of their posts, they also began to take advantage of the Internet's hyperlinking capabilities by linking to two external sources that lent credibility to their argument. It was still important for the student to gain experience in blog management by learning how to post links, write in a style and tone that is both professional and thought-provoking, and personalization of blog templates.

Blogs have gone mainstream.

Organizations cannot afford to ignore blogs criticizing them.

Dell hired employees whose sole job it is to monitor the blogging landscape.

Richard Edelman: "Students need to blog and join conversations, not just to write for the newspaper and to create PR campaigns for local businesses. Faculty can lead the way by starting their own blogs . . . to discuss their projects and learnings."

Blogs illustrate the importance of message design . . . and the targeting of messages to active Internet publics.

In the remaining weeks, students began to read other students' blogs and were asked to respond to their posts with comments. In the third week, the professor sent out the list of URLs to the students in the class. This allowed students to browse each others' blogs and see what aspects of public relations people were exploring. By responding to the original posts, they created dialogues about different topics that may not have been covered in class.

Students were also required to post at least one original, researched post on their own blog that contained links to credible sources, and they were required to respond to at least one of the other students' blogs. This assignment does require the instructor be an active participant in the assignment by monitoring the discussions on all of the blogs, and the professor must stress some of the basics of public relations writing, including following the rules of grammar, spelling, punctuation, and AP Style. In the final three weeks of the assignment, students were required to set up a Web tracking account and monitor the blogosphere for posts about their topic. The students monitored a minimum of two RSS Web feeds and conducted a search for key terms utilizing an existing aggregator site, such as Google Alerts or Technorati. They submitted the blogging equivalent of a media clip book on their topic each week that summarized key themes in the previous week's comments as well as providing a list of the posts. By learning how to sort through the vast number of posts each week to find the ones relevant to the client, the students gained critical scanning and issues awareness skills.

Though this paper recommends that blog management be incorporated into the public relations writing course, the authors have both implemented blog management into a variety of graduate and undergraduate courses, including public relations case studies, principles, and electives courses. Instructors can use blogs to facilitate class discussions and generate reactions to weekly readings. By requiring students to blog as a component to the course, the assignment enables deeper conversations on issues that may not be covered during class due to time constraints.

Student Evaluation of the Blogging Assignment

Focus groups were conducted to evaluate how the students felt about the topic and the assignment. Overall, students had a positive response to the topic though there was some initial hesitation. A few students felt that "it was tough deciding what to write on, I mean, what am I an expert in." Others thought that the decision of what to write about was fairly simple and that the challenge was deciding what to write knowing that "I'm exposing people to my own thoughts, so I had to be careful what I write." One commented that writing for blogs was "very different from other types [of public relations writing]. I'm not sure if I am doing it right but I feel like its more thought provoking."

Perhaps most promising, the blogging assignment helped students understand the goal of public relations. "Everyone says public relations is about relationships, but I never really got that feeling. It was all sort of one sided." She added, "This was the first assignment where I thought we were capable of having a real conversation with a public." The potential for blogging was acknowledged, although some questioned its' power: "I see it working for some, but can a blogging really influence someone who's not an active public?"

The students recognized and favored the dialogue process though they also recognized the difficulty of blog management. "At first, I thought this was just going to be just another writing assignment," one student commented. But that initial reaction changed once it was realized that:

"You want to be perceived as credible and knowledgeable so you scour various sources to get the whole picture. I think it's more difficult to write this than a press release or newsletter. Not to mention with this assignment, I had to answer questions people posted on my blog. If I didn't answer, it looked as if I was trying to avoid the question. You don't think about that with a press release."

Shortly after giving the blog assignment to the students, their initial hesitance was replaced with confidence and an understanding of its impact. One student commented, "no one knows who you are in blogs, so it makes it easier for some people to truly speak their minds. It uncovers things that may have otherwise remained hidden."

Students indicated that the assignment also made them more critical in their reading. "Blogs are a lot of opinion," one student said, "While some have good information, there's no way to tell if it's official or not." Echoing these sentiments, another did not "trust what a blog said unless it gave me the link to the original source. I mean, it doesn't take much to link to the original information."

Finally, one student noted that even though there was some initial hesitation, the dialogue and discussion that emerged from the blogs was one of the more rewarding aspects of the assignment. Summed up simply, "It's fun."

Conclusion

Though often misunderstood by those outside the blogosphere, the blog has true potential for becoming a relationship-building and maintenance strategy for organizations and their key stakeholders. By exposing students to the dialogic nature of blogs, educators are capable of showing the impact of interpersonal relationships in the public relations setting. One important lesson that students and educators can take away from the blogging assignment is that this new, emerging tactic allows organizations to be in touch with this very loyal Internet public in a two-way relationship that is unparalleled in its potential impact.

Blogging has been embraced and acknowledged as a major influence on organizational behavior and communication, as evidenced in the behavior of Edelman, Dell, and many other communications and public relations departments, The blogging assignment challenges educators to learn more about

Week 1:
Establish a blog and e-mail a hyperlink to the instructor.

Week 2:
Research the topic and post links.

Week 3:
Access other students' blogs and establish dialogue.

Final Three Weeks:
Set up a Web tracking account and monitor two RSS Web feeds. Submit the blogging equivalent of a media clip book.

the new medium while offering students a chance to prepare for a future where they will be required to manage and monitor blogs on a regular basis.

This new, emerging tactic allows organizations to be in touch with this very loyal Internet public in a two-way relationship that is unparalleled in its potential impact.

REFERENCES

- AdAge.com (2006, Feb. 21). Micropersuasion moves to Edelman. [Online]. Accessed: March 26, 2006. Available: <http://www.webprowire.com/summaries/1256304.html>.
- Edelman, R. (2006, March 27). A view into the state of pr education. [Online]. Accessed September 16, 2006. Available: http://www.edelman.com/speak_up/blog/archives/2006/03/index.html.
- Grunig, J. E. (2001). Two way symmetrical public relations: Past, present, and future. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 11-30). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jarvis, J. (2005, June 21). Dell lies. Dell sucks. [Online]. Accessed: March 26, 2006. Available: http://www.buzzmachine.com/archives/cat_dell.html.
- Kelleher, T. & Miller, B. M. (2006). Organizational blogs and the human voice: Relational strategies and relational outcomes. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2), article 1.
- Kent, M. L., & Taylor, M. (1998). Building dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web. *Public Relations Review*, 24(3), 321- 334.
- Kent, M. L., Taylor, M., & White, W. J. (2003). The relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholders. *Public Relations Review*, 29, 63-77.
- Pew Center. (2005, January). The Pew Internet and American Life Project, "The state of blogging." [Online]. Accessed: March 27, 2006. Available: http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_blogging_data.pdf.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2006, March). The state of the news media 2006: An annual report on American journalism. [Online]. Accessed: March 28, 2006. Available: http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/2006/narrative_online_intro.asp?media=4
- Schwartz, J. (2005, Sept. 16). A Simple Request to Sun's Employees. [Online]. Accessed September 16, 2006. Available: http://blogs.sun.com/roller/page/jonathan?entry=a_simple_request_to_sun
- Searls, D., & Weinberger, D. (2001). Markets are conversations. In R. Levine, C. Locke, D. Searls, & D. Weinberger (Eds.), *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual* (pp. 75-114). New York: Perseus Publishing.
- Seltzer (2005). The dialogic potential of weblogs in relationship building. Paper presented to the Association for Education of Journalism and Mass Communication annual conference, Public Relations Division. San Antonio, TX.
- Taylor, M., Kent, M. L., & White, W. J. (2001). How activist organizations are using the Internet to build relationships. *Public Relations Review*, 27(3), 263-284.
- Unaesthetic. (2004, Sept. 12). Your brand new bicycle u-lock is not safe! [Online]. Accessed September 16, 2006. Available: <http://www.bikeforums.net/showthread.php?t=67493&highlight=Kryptonite>.
- Vinny. (2006, June 13). Cancelling AOL. [Online]. Accessed: September 16, 2006. Available: <http://insignificantthoughts.com/2006/06/13/cancelling-aol/>

The blogging assignment challenges educators to learn more about the new medium while offering students a chance to prepare for a future where they will be required to manage and monitor blogs on a regular basis.