

Determinants of Blog Success

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There has been an explosive growth of blogs over the past decade. Using information from eBizMBA Rank, timelines of top ranked blogs were created for identifying key factors that determine growth and success. The findings show that top blogs were created by well-connected individuals with access to unique content not found elsewhere, which subsequently allowed them to better target and grow their audience base. Finally, these blog founders were continuously innovative with a plan for business expansion; including, an approach for seeking investments and promoting their blog continuously.

INTRODUCTION

Staying abreast in today's competitive blogosphere requires an understanding of successful blogger strategies and tactics. There has been an explosive growth of blogs in the past decade. In 2011 there were nearly 160 million public blogs in existence. As of April 2013, this number has more than doubled. The latest findings from Technorati's 2013 Digital Influence Report show that "consumers are turning to blogs when looking to make a purchase." Blogs rank favorably with consumers for trust, popularity and influence because of the informality of conversation; thus, making a blog a cost-effective method for marketing activities and business practices. Given the popularity of blogs for brand building, demand generation, and purchasing decisions, the purpose of this research is to identify key elements of blog growth and success. By identifying key determinants of blog success, firms gain a further understanding of how blogging facilitates the marketing of products, services, and/or brand (Schmidt & Ralph 2011). Even more, the ability to identify market opportunities in blogging is an essential prerequisite for gaining a competitive advantage. An approach for studying dynamic competitive firm behavior is through patterns of actions and reaction of firms over time (Miller & Chen 1996a, b; Grimm & Smith 1997; Ferner 2001; Chi, Ravichandran & Andrevski, 2010).

A blogger is the new expert, opinion leader, trendsetter, or friend. Blogs function for a wide range purposes in varying fields, and in many ways are similar to an online journal, diary, or magazine. The growth of Internet created opportunities for bloggers to gain expert and professional status, and to build an audience/fan base that can be ultimately monetized (Goldsmith and Wu 2006). According to the "state of blogosphere 2011" report, bloggers have a growing influence over readers and other bloggers (emarketer.com 2011). Moreover, these statistics indicate that the manner in which the blogger communicates determines the extent to which their perspective is accepted; ultimately, affecting the influence of bloggers' opinions and recommendations on the consumer decision process (Zue and Karande 2012).

History of Blogging

Today blogs are part of our daily online modern culture. People turn to blogs like newspapers and magazines, as millions of people and organizations create blogs to share, spread, and voice information and opinions. Originally, as Jorn Barger termed it, the blog concept started in 1997 as a “weblog” (Wired 2007). The currently used term “blog” was created by Peter Merholz, who jokingly broke the word *weblog* into the phrase *we blog* in the sidebar of his blog *Peterme.com* in April/May 1997 (Merholz 1997). Blogs vary in form and complexity, whereas some offer a commentary on a particular subject, while others function more like a diary. A typical blog combines text, images, blog links, Web pages, reader comments, and other media related to its topic. The ability of readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important contribution to the popularity of many blogs. Most blogs are primarily textual, although some focus on art, photographs, videos, music and audio.

The modern blog started like an online diary with bloggers keeping a thread of their personal life. At first, blogs resembled websites; however, with advancements in technology, a wide range of tools evolved to facilitate easy blogging to meet the demands of the less technology savvy bloggers. Presently, there are many blog friendly formats for bloggers to choose. The most common include WordPress, Blogger, Tumblr, Wix, Weebly, and Squarespace, respectively.

Until 2009, blogs were usually personal; meaning, the work of one person. An example of a personal blog is *PerezHilton.com*, formally called *PageSixSixSix.com* (Varley 2013). The blog has the reputation for covering celebrity gossip and posting tabloid photographs. A variation of the personal blog format is one that collaborates works from a group of people, covering a single subject or a theme. An example of a blog that collaborates works of writers is *The Huffington Post*, founded by Arianna Huffington in May 2005. Resembling a magazine, *The Huffington Post* is an online news aggregator that includes localized and international editions, and features columnists covering politics, business, entertainment, environment, technology, popular media, lifestyle, culture, comedy, healthy living, women's interests, and local news (Kurtz 2007).

The rise of Twitter and other “microblogging” systems add a new twist to blogging by emphasizing trending subject matters and breaking news. The majority of microblogging systems are interactive, offering visitors an opportunity to post comments, use hash tags, and message each other. This microblogging system transformed blogging into a new form of social media, offering bloggers the potential of producing content, building relationships with readers and other bloggers (Gaudeul and Peroni 2010), and driving traffic to their blog.

Today, the more popular blogs have high engagement, which translates into comments, social sharing, and a loyal fan base. To increase blog engagement and a fan base, bloggers are encouraged to be themselves, know their audience, write engaging content, make the most of trial and error, provide great post titles, look professional, ask questions, respond to all comments, get social, follow other blogs, comment elsewhere, and guest post elsewhere (Cowan 2013).

Blog Advantages

Blogs create a new voice on the web. The blogosphere in general offers blog audiences the opportunity to learn about a variety of subject matters and new ideas. The advantages of blogging include the following:

Raise Awareness and Improve Image

Blogs function as a promotional and social media tool for brands to raise awareness. Audiences gain a better understanding of the brand through text, images, comments, and other media. To the extent that the blog offers something of value, audiences are more likely to spread positive word of mouth, raise brand awareness, and improve the brand’s overall image.

Create New Leads and Build a Fan Base

The ability of readers to leave comments in an interactive format offers brands an opportunity to connect with audiences. Blogging is one of the most effective ways for large/small businesses and

individuals to generate new leads, build a mailing list, and create a fan base. According to Marx (2015), businesses who blog just twice a month receive up to 67% more leads than their competitors who do not, and when a blog post includes the right keywords, it is easily found online.

Get Feedback for Continuous Improvement

Blogs are useful to brands for generating feedback in real time, as readers react to posts. If a customer posts negative feedback that pertains to a brand, it becomes valuable information for continuous improvement. While positive feedback is excellent for generating buzz for a brand, negative feedback is critical for continuous improvement and long-term success. Readers’ feedback and comments offer an opportunity for the blog to make it right by responding. Ultimately, the brand receives recognition as a trustworthy product backed by people who really care.

Build Relationships and Brand Loyalty

Blogs offer brands the opportunity to use social media for engagement, which brings about stronger customer relationships and brand loyalty. Nurturing relationships with customers is critical for growing a successful business, since it leads to increased credibility and trust. In today’s internet environments, at any moment, an unhappy customer can share an opinion on social media with the masses that can negatively influence a business, which is why it is critical to create an interactive daily blog presence to nourish customer relationships. Timely feedback, product information, informative posts, original content, and customer deals/offers all are useful for developing relationships with blog audiences, and fostering a direct connection with the brand.

Generate Profitability

There are countless success stories of entrepreneurs, businesses, brands, and celebrities that turn ideas into multimillion-dollar enterprises, as well as individuals who attain celebrity status via blogging. However, the vast majority of blogs make less than \$3.50 per day, since blogging requires a huge commitment of time to build an audience, and most of these blogs are less than two years old (Rowse 2013). The profits that a blog generates depends on several factors, including how the blog creates content, the quality and originality of the content, how competitive the topic is, and how focused the blog is at driving traffic to the site.

BLOG TIMELINES

In creating blogs, there is a plethora of articles, but few that examine key elements to explain why some are more influential than others are. To uncover measures of blog success, the author created timelines of top blogs using information derived from eBizMBA Rank (<http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/blogs>). The blogs analyzed were Huffington Post, TMZ, Business Insider, Engadget, Perez Hilton, Mashable, and TechCrunch (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1
BLOG TIMELINES**

huffingtonpost.com

2005	Arianna Huffington launches Huffington Post group blog with former AOL executive Kenneth Lerer and MIT grad Jonah Peretti with many famous bloggers, writers, and A-list celebrities contributing free of charge. The move generates mixed reaction, given her a visible role in politics and the celebrity world.
2006	SoftBank Capital and Greycroft Partners invest \$5 million for expansion for Huffington Post to hire more staff, in-house reporters, and a multimedia team.

2007	Editorial expansion – politics, media, entertainment, business, and living. Huffington Post rewards top commenters, featuring them as bloggers on the site.
2008	Observer names Huffington Post #1 on the “The world’s 50 most powerful blogs.” Huffington Post raises \$15 million in fundraising from investors for further expansion; including, more journalism and local news editions across the United States.
2009	Time Magazine awards Huffington Post with second best blog of 2009. Huffington Post continues to expand.
2010	Huffington Post directs content to social media by launching a Twitter site. It was rumored that this was Huffington Post’s way of competing with Facebook.
2011	AOL acquires Huffington post for \$315 million. Huffington Post goes global.
2012	Huffington Post is at 1 billion page views. Spanish and Italian language editions are launched, with plans for Germany and Spain.

tmz.com

2005	Founded by Harvey Levin with backing from AOL and Telepictures Productions, a division of Warner Bros.
2006	First source to report ground breaking stories, including: actor Mel Gibson’s DUI arrest, and anti-Semitic comments; pop-singer Britney Spears’ petition for divorce from then-husband Kevin Federline; and socialite Paris Hilton 45-day sentence for driving with a suspended license under the influence of alcohol four months prior. Time magazine names TMZ one of the coolest websites.
2007	Newsweek magazine names TMZ the “Breakout Blog of 2007. TMZ launches a television series, TMZ on TV.
2009	TMZ releases police evidence photo of pop singer Rihanna after being assaulted by now ex-partner Chris Brown. The photo led to an investigation by Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to determine the legality of the sale of Rihanna’s photo to serve as evidence. Subsequently, a new law, “Rihanna Law,” was created to prevent victim exploitation. That same year, TMZ was first to break the story on Chicago’s Northern Trust Bank, the death of Michael Jackson, and the death of Brittany Murphy. Also, TMZ’s revenue is publicly disclosed for the first time.

businessinsider.com

2007	Founded by Henry Blodget, the financial journalist and former Wall Street analyst, and two former executives of DoubleClick.
2008	Silicon Alley Insider joins with other blogs Clusterstock, Money Game, and The Wire to build a new leading online business site.
2009	Business Insider Website launched, and begins to host industry conferences.
2010	In the fourth quarter of 2010 businessinsider.com reports first profits.
2012	Business Insider has 5.4 million unique visitors.
2015	Business Insider hosts industry conferences including IGNITION, which explores digital media, and launches BI Intelligence, a subscription-based research service; and publishes editorial franchises such as the “Digital 100: The World’s Most Valuable Private Tech Companies.” German publisher Axel Springer buys Business Insider, writing a check for \$343 million at the close of the deal. The deal values Business Insider at \$442 million, but Springer already owned 9 percent of the company.

engadget.com

2004	Founded by Peter Rojas, former Gizmodo technology weblog editor and co-founder, as an alternative to the giant tech blog Gizmodo, owned by Gawker Media. Rojas left Gizmodo and parent company Gawker Inc. to start Engadget, a direct competitor to Gawker Media Inc. That year, Engadget launches its podcast.
2005	AOL purchased Engadget and Weblogs Inc. for 25 million dollars.

2009	Engadget releases its first mobile app for the iPhone and iPod Touch. The first episode of the Engadget Show airs on its website, featuring one-on-one interviews, roundtable discussion, short video segments, and live music.
2011	"Engadget Distro," the first print Engadget Magazine, is launched.
	Engadget announced Expand, a "live event and expo for gadget fans." This marks Engadget's first introduction to conferences, following several years of sporadic meetups at smaller venues in New York City and San Francisco.
2013	Engadget hosts its first Engadget Convention, "Engadget Expand."

perezhilton.com

2004	Perez Hilton launches his first celebrity gossip blog pagesixsixsix.com, making him unique is his approach to celebrity gossip. He attends celebrity awards shows, clubs, and private events, and posts photographs of himself with the celebrities he writes about under the "Personally Perez" category of his blog.
2005	Within six months of launch, PageSixSixSix.com was named "Hollywood's Most-Hated Website" by The Insider. New York Post sued Perez Hilton and PageSixSixSix.com for its name too similar to the "page 6" section in their paper, which dealt with celebrity gossip. PerezHilton.com is formed as a result.
2007-2008	<i>What Perez Says</i> airs on VH1, a reality TV show about his life.
2010	Perez Hilton hits the radio waves in 3 different US cities (Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York) with a twice-daily 3-minute gossip news update.
2012	Perez Hilton starts his own radio show.

Mashable.com

2005	At 19, Pete Cashmore works out of his basement and forms a blog known for unique content and informative articles on digital- and social media. Mashable.com soon expands to include technology news, and evolves to become a competitor to TechCrunch.
2006	First Mashable awards hosted.
2007	Mashable hosts SummerMash, a nationwide tour, and hosts parties for users and fans, greatly enhancing its image and popularity amongst younger users.
2009	Time rates Mashable.com a Top 25 blog of 2009, and a one stop shop for social media news.
2010	Rumors swirl that Pete Cashmore may be in talks with AOL to sell Mashable.com.
2011	Mashable expands to cover entertainment news, U.S. News, and International News, creating a new vision of a one-stop shop for all news aimed at the younger digital friendly generation.
2012	Pete Cashmore denies that he is in talks to sell Mashable.com for 200 million dollars to CNN.

TechCrunch.com

2005	Founded by Michael Arrington, a blog dedicated to technology, news, and review of products.
2006-present	TechCrunch expands to become a network that includes many other blogs, all under the TechCrunch umbrella. Most popular is CrunchBase, a database consisting of investors, incubators and startups that connects people in this space.
2007-2009	Hosts TechCrunch50, designed to be an annual live convention honoring the best Web 2.0 applications, but discontinued after 2009.
2010	AOL announces that it is purchasing TechCrunch.com for 25 million dollars. AOL parts ways with Michael Arrington and puts TechCrunch under the umbrella of their already existing Blog network.

LAUNCHING A SUCCESSFUL BLOG

In today's competitive environment, a successful blog creates many opportunities. Blogging is an excellent approach for self-promotion and personal branding. Blogging about something that is original and relevant to a target audience validates the blogger's expert status as an authority on the subject, which can ultimately lead to new business contacts, business opportunities, and speaking engagements. Moreover, once the blog creates a huge following, there are ways to generate a revenue stream, including advertising, affiliate marketing, digital products, physical products, and services. Even more, blogging enables writers to create original content that either relates to a topic of interest or expertise in a writing format that suits the blogger; that is, writers can determine ways to position a story, and decide what information to include/exclude.

An analysis of the timelines show that the most successful blogs are those created by well-connected individuals with access to unique content not found elsewhere, which subsequently allowed them to better target their audiences and grow them quickly. This is consistent with Hinz et al. (2011), in stressing the importance of connected persons as initial seeds in generating awareness because their hubs promise a wider spread of the message. Based on the timelines generated, seeding to well-connected people is the most successful approach because these attractive seeding points the blogger connects to are more likely to spread word of mouth and participate in viral marketing campaigns that is critical for increasing the blog's readership.

An analysis of timelines of top blogs shows a number of characteristics that set them apart. Overall, these top blogs conveyed a professional image with a unique voice and personality that differentiated them from other blogs in that space. Collectively, these successful blogs were very focused and attracted audiences with huge growth potential, which overtime transformed into interactive online communities. Given that most of the founders from the start were well connected, they had access to content that was not readily available elsewhere. These founders attended events and created events, which allowed them to create new content and grow their audience base quickly. Their successful blogs demonstrate that the more unique, innovative, original, jaw-dropping, attention getting, unusual, controversial, proprietary, or edgy the content is, the greater the likelihood of building a fan base fast. Finally, the founders of the blogs in the timeline were continuously innovative with a plan for expansion by adopting a multifaceted approach to seeking investments and promoting the blog continuously.

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