TreeWorks

Blogs – Alternative Communication And Advertising Methods For Corporations

Blogs are gaining more and more users and readers. Having the peak during the presidential campaign in America of 2004, when over 50% of the Internet users were reading weblogs, this type of application is now used by politicians, journalists and corporations as an alternative communication method.

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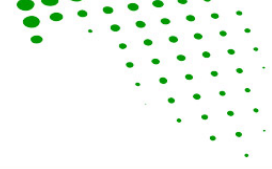Bucureşti, România

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Content

Blog. ID.

Notă: Partea introductivă a materialului (Capitolele 1-3) se adresează persoanelor neinițiate încă în lumea blogurilor. Aceasta conține definiții și termeni utilizați în blogosferă, un posibil punct de pornire pentru cei care nu sunt familiarizați cu această metodă de comunicare online.

Un blog este un jurnal updatat frecvent și publicat pe internet pentru consumul publicului general, construit pe o platforma de CMS (Content Management System). El se diferențiază de alte pagini prin faptul că datele sunt afișate în ordinea inversă a introducerii lor.

Blogurile oferă informații, comentarii, opinii despre un subiect predilect (de exemplu: politic, publicitate, știri locale, informații personale), iar conținutul poate fi în format text, audio, video. Întregul spațiu al blogurilor și al bloggerilor a devenit cunoscut drept "blogosferă".

Blogul modern a evoluat din jurnalele online, care erau la început doar componente updatate ale unor situri obișnuite. Odată cu evoluția programelor care facilitează introducerea și afișarea articolelor într-o ordine invers cronologică, procesul a devenit accesibil unui public mai larg.

Termenul *weblog* a fost inventat de Jorn Barger pe 17 decembrie 1997, iar forma prescurtată a apărut după ce Peter Merholz, în aprilie 1999, a spart cuvântul într-o propoziție ("we *blog*") în sidebar-ul blogului său, Peterme.com. În timp, numărul blogurilor a crescut, la fiecare 5 luni ajungând să se dubleze.(Figura 1) În noiembrie 2006, Tehnocrati – un motor de căutare pentru bloguri – ajunsese să înregistreze aproximativ 60 de milioane de bloguri.
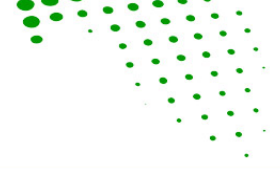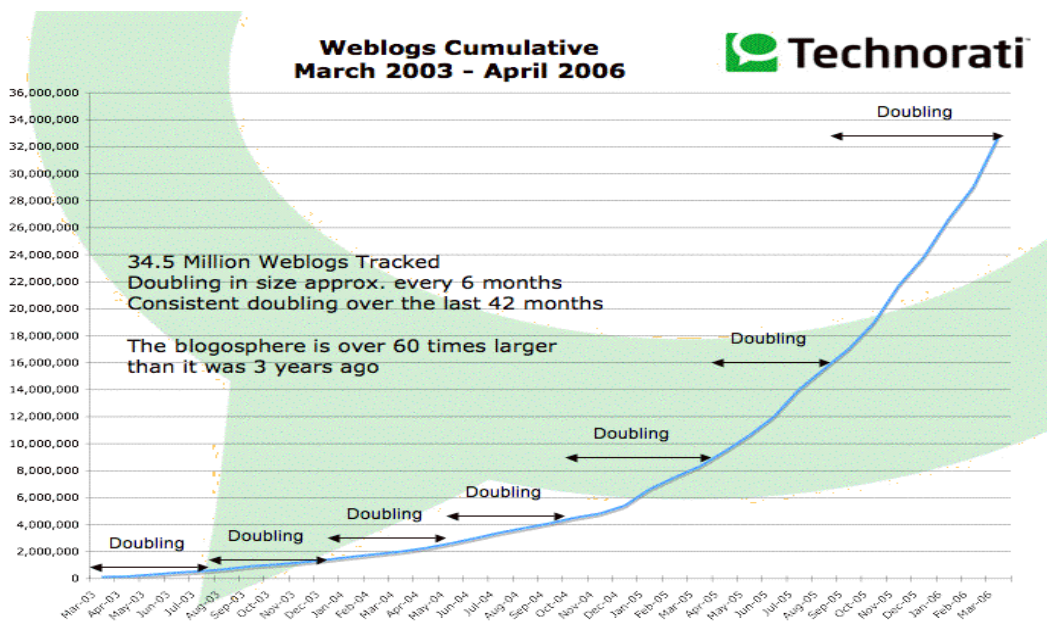

Figure 1

Blog Anatomy

Post – The word used for every new blog entry.

Comments – People reading the posts can leave comments after each one of them. These can lead to a debate or exchange of ideas. A link to the comments can be found after either the title or the content of the post.

Links – Almost all the posts include hyper links to the sources or references used in the text or to other blogs, web pages.

Permalink – A permanent link to a blog entry. Due to the format of blogs, a permalink allows you to quote or link a post on a constant and steady page, that will not change in time.

Trackback – Links that can be copied in a new post or introduced in other blogs' posts and that refer to the original post are named trackbacks. These create the total structure of links and offer multiple possibilities to find the original post, because the search engine lists pages regarding the number of web pages offering links to them.
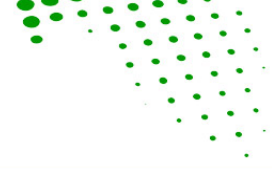
Categories – A blogger may place a post into a specific category, allowing the user to read only the post from a certain category which interests him.

Archive – Old posts can be read anytime, the main advantage of weblogs being the fact that everything is archived.

RSS Feed – RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a tool that allows the users to read the new posts without visiting the blog's URL.

Blogroll – A list with other blogs the blogger likes or reads.

Tag – Tags help defining the main keywords on a web page, thus on a blog page also.

The Blog And The Company

How to dust the online image of your firm?

A cororate blog is a blog published and used by an organization, whose goal is the reach of some parameters / objectives that are linked to efficiency or promotion. It can become the personalized face of the company, the direct contact with the clients of the expert needed by them.

Therefore, a corporate blog is, before all, a binder between the company and the clients. Corporate blogs may be internal or external.

The Internal Blog.
Help Your Employees.

Internal blogs are powerful tools for communication and information, accessible for a closed community. Their goal is to stimulate or motivate the employees.
There are big corporations that have at least a few internal blogs, focused on different targets or for different goals and the employees are actually encouraged to create internal blogs (Google, DrKWSUN, IBM, Microsoft, HP, Macromedia). The April 11 2006 Financial Times edition says that these new networking technologies (blogs, wikis) encourage new collaborative methods between the employees, thus helping the productivity.

For example, IBM had in June 2005 30913 posts, 13155 comments, with an average 1255 posts per month during the last 6 months, as Philippe Borremans, PR Manager at IBM Belgia & Luxemburg states. Most IBM blogs are internal ones.

Why Implement An Internal Blog?

- **It's practical.** Blogs are more useful and practical than email, because the average number of emails received by a person per day is big, these are not always being archived and the information might be lost.

- **Easy to follow information.** The system that arranges information in the inverse chronological order is easy to follow. Plus, the RSS technology - that most new browsers (Firefox, Opera, Safari, IE7) support – allows the user to view the latest post without accessing the web site's URL.

- **Involves the employees.** When the decisions are being shown and commented directly, the employees feel involved in the decisional process, don't feel ignored and can thus share opinions, comments regarding the company or its projects.

- **Increases the creativity.** Being an open interactional medium, very easy to transform into a live conversation, blogs allow the users to come up with new ideas, offering a spontaneous collaboration. Different opinions lead to debates, in this way creating an organized frame for the discussion of a project or an idea.
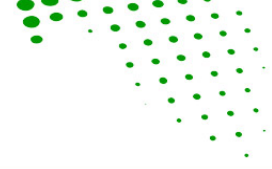
- **Can be alternatives for meeting.** For large companies, due to the distance or different schedules, meetings are not always being materialized easily. Blogs help the members of the same community to communicate, by replacing the meetings.

- **Makes the searching process easier.** Blogs use tags and not directories, thus making the entire searching process much easier than with the emails. To help their employees, some companies have developed their own tag taxonomy.

- **Offers a general view.** The internal blog offers a general view over the company as a whole, integrating the opinions and comments under the same umbrella.

- **Is useful when working with heterogeneous teams.** Blogs are useful tools when heterogeneous teams are used only for the lengths of a project. The fast integration of employees is allowed and the knowledge database is available for all.

- **Content is being delivered fast and at minimal costs.** Content reaches the members in real time and the implementation costs are minimal.

How do companies react?

In general there is a lack of interest regarding blogs as informational tools, these being viewed rather as an informal communication channels between the employees. That is why blogs are being underrated and rather ignored. There is a general fear that the information will not be controlled and that is why rules are being imposed. To solve this problem, it has to be clear that the use of blogs is defined as part of a strategy, planned and communicated as such. What is appropriate for posting must be clear for everyone. However, due to its format, these things should not confuse employees; official documents have a different format.

The time consumption is another question for managers. Employees will read and write on the blog during work time. On an internal blog, information should help readers achieve the tasks and get the needed information to do so, receive feedback or new ideas.

All these things make productivity grow, the communication becoming much more easier. Therefore blogs are not about wasted time. The study conducted by the Umass Dartmouth - *Behind The Scenes In Blogosphere. Advice From Established Bloggers* – at which 78 bloggers took part, 58 percent of them stated that the time the daily time spent maintaining their blog was between one and two hours. (Figure 2)
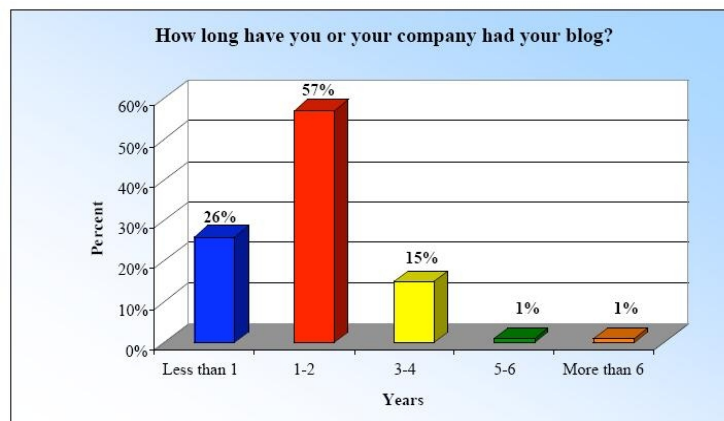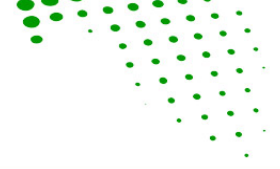

Figure 2

External Blog

How does your company profit from the online?

External corporative blogs have as a primal goal the promotional communication and public relationships activities, these leading to creating an identity / an image of the company or the product. Also, they are being created to encourage clients' feedback.

Being communication tools that create a complex efficient network through the use of links and connections, helping the company to impose itself in the field.
Blogs can also become learning tools for companies, facilitating the production team to improve its services or products by viewing the consumers' feedback.

Not only corporative instruments, but also client-targeted tools, blogs allow a more direct communication with Internet users. This method of interacting with the client, giving the chance of discussing your product or service is called Consumer Generated Marketing (CGM). CGM adds credibility to your company and offers a chance to present itself in front of clients in a friendlier, more informal and dynamic way.

External corporate blogs can be of multiple types:

- a manager / CEO's blog, that communicates informations about the company using an informal language (like Bob Langert – McDonald's, David Sifry-Tehnocrati, Bob Sutor - IBM);
- the official blog of the company;
- the blog that centers on a product of the company (like: Dell Linux Engineering Weblog, S60 Blogs, Forum Nokia Blogs, Midwest Airlines Travels with Tish -- Girlfriends' Getaway Guide).
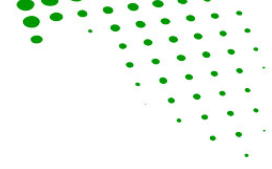
What does a corporate blog do for you?

- **Improves traffic on the website.** Blogs help the traffic of the website improve, the users having a reason to return if the posts are displayed regularly.

- **Expands company's online visibility.** The blogger community is a very prominent one on the Internet. Although there are not that many blogs, there are a lot of readers.

  Comments and posts generate the phenomenon called "buzz", thus increasing the promotion. In 2005, blogs began posting paragraphs form an online discussion from a forum, where a person was bragging that he can brake a Kryptonite bike using just a Bic pen. In a week, the incident was mentioned in the *New York Times*.

- **Help building a community of consumers.** The online offers socializing methods for its members. Interaction and communication are the best ways to build a community around your blog. To help the conversation develop, the post should not be written in a cold, informal way.

  Bob Lutz, Global Product Development Vice President at General Motors states in an article appeared in *Information Week* that there is no better way to start an open dialog and to exchange ideas with clients and prospects than the blog. General Motors launched in January 2006 the GM Fastlane blog, that reached to 5000 visitors, with 13 000 pages opened daily.

- **A blog allows the website to go higher in the searches**, because it uses tags and has an updated content.

- **Offers the company a personalized, human voice**, making the firm closer to its clients. An example is the blog of the ex-Microsoft employee: <u>Robert Scoble</u>. Many people started to see Microsoft as "the place where Scoble works".
  Another is <u>The Stonyfield Farm</u> blog, where a farmer notes his daily activities, from the calves season to the maple one. The success comes from the fact that it presents unique experiences from an organic farm, written in a simple and accessible format.

- **Authorizes the expertize.** Like Deborah Franke (www.emersonprocessxperts.com) mentions, a blog is a right way to impose oneself as an expert in the online community, offering expertize and advice in one's field.

- **They are an alternative media form.** Some of the publishers have built viable media outlets with the help of faithful clients, like big companies that produce sponsored blogs did (like <u>Gawker Media</u>).

- **Word Of Mouth Marketing.** The JupiterResearch Study from 2005 shows that blogs generate WoM marketing opportunities. From the interviewed marketing managers, only 32% said they use the corporative blog to generate WoM for their products or services.

  Adobe has a blog <u>aggregator</u> that counts over 800 blogs from the entire blogosphere. There may be blogs written by Adobe employees, by clients or persons interested in the company's products. It is interesting that it also offers statistics about the most popular posts, translations in different languages. In this way Adobe can visualize the propagation of the promotion the company has on the online medium.

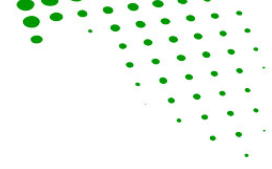## Blog – A viable marketing / promotion method.

In the study "Behind The Scenes In Blogosphere. Advice From Established Bloggers", made by the Center for Marketing Research Of The University of Dartmouth Massauchusetts, 74 A-list American bloggers were included, most of them having an independent blog for 2-3 years. 68% of them also had a direct or indirect contact with big corporations.

Most of them stated that the blog achieved its primal purpose for which it has been created. (Figure 3)

Also, bloggers stated that the reason they decided to implement a blog was marketing / promotion or PR / communication with the clients (31% and 27%). (Figure 4)

However, the blog remains an optional promotion solution.

For companies that prefer not to implement a blog for the PR activities, identifying the first 10 bloggers from their field and maintaining a good relationships with them is a possible alternative.
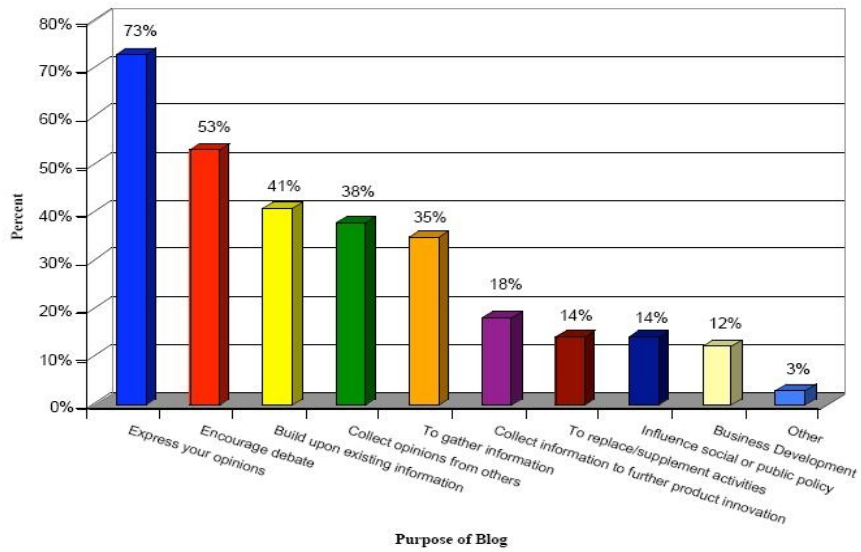
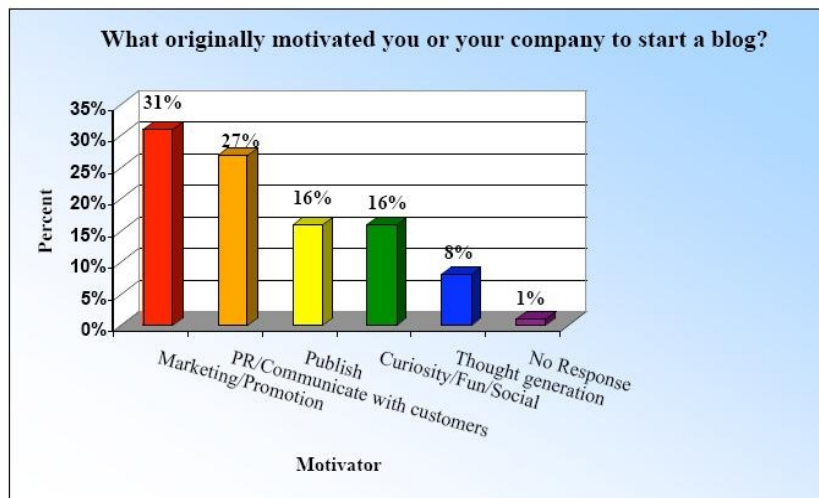**What is the primary purpose of your blog?**

Figure 3

Figure 4

At the same conclusion arrived Netflix (that the relation with the bloggers from the same field has to be maintained), when a fan named Mike Kaltschnee created a blog called Hacking Netflix that contained news about the online movie renting services of Netflix.

Kaltschnee demanded access to press releases and briefing, but Netflix ignored him until he started writing about his personal frustration on his blog, thus being known in the entire blogoshpere.
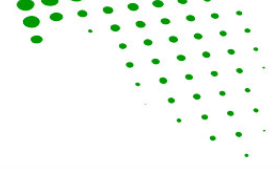
How And What To Do Before Implementing A Blog

Northeastern University and Backbone Media conducted a study in 2006 about the success of a blog. They presented answers and pieces of advice from persons who implemented or wrote for corporate blogs and case studies about companies that have corporative blogs. It also presentes a few questions that need to be answered before implementing a blog:

1. **Why do you need strategic planning?** Before implementing a blog you have to decide on its goal, target and the ways a blog can help you attain your purpose. As Heather Hamilton (Microsoft) says for Blogging Success Study, "the cause of the Microsoft blog success is the fact that I have a job that can be achieved through blogging, that being building an employee brand." If you do not know what you want from this blog, you will probable not register changes.

2. **Who is going to blog?** Choosing the persons that will create the content of the blog is a factor of a possible success of the blog. There are a few qualities a corporate blogger should have:
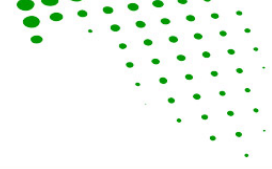
   • **Capacity to listen and talk to your audience.** If the blogger cannot create a contact with your readers, everything leading to a conversation, then creating a community may not be one of the blog's achievements.

   • **Passion for the subject.** To be able to write about a thing you have to know it. And to be able to write frequently about it, you have to like that thing.

   Posts' diversity is an important element to maintain visitors.

The Southwest Airlines blog is an example of a multiple authors blog, thus providing more, diverse content. Especially that the authors of the blog work in different departments.

• **The ability to build an online personality.** Usually, the impression you leave online is different than the one from your every day life. That is why you have to be able to build a personality and to stick to it. Otherwise, you might confuse readers and loose the credibility.

• **Perseverance and devotion.** For a blog to be successful, it has to have a big enough posts rate. If not, it should at least be regulate. So the blogger has to be passioned by the project and not abandon it after the novelty factor has passed.

• **Expertise in a domain or variated subjects.** The blogger must be either an expert, very specialized in a domain, either a person that can adapt easily to different subjects concerning the company or the promoted product.

• **A warm and close communication.** The specific language for the blogs is an informal, familiar one.
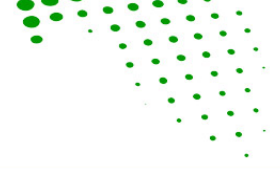
The blogger must be viewed as a regular person and not as a spokesman. This being one of the main reasons companies implement blogs: the possibility of an open, informal discussion with clients and prospects.

- **The ability to communicate efficiently in written.** Presenting itself mostly in a text format, the quality content of a blog is an important factor in achieving the goals. Posts may contain interesting or useful information, but if they are written in a blunt, boring way, they become not only useless, but they can harm the company's image.

- **Time to manage the blog.** Like any other activity, blogging takes time too. If you do not want the aspect and content to look neglected, make sure the person writing the posts has time to conceive and insert them.

- **Critical openness.** A person not being capable to listen / evaluate critics, associated with the image of your company, creates in the consumers' mind the impression the producer is not open to a dialog with them hence not being interested by suggestions / critics. This may, in a short time, lead clients away.

3. **How do you bone up on the blogosphere?** Simple. You read other blogs and learn from their mistakes or successes. You must identify first of all the bloggers from your industry to interact with them online.

4. **How do you exercise?** Practice on an internal blog. This will also help your employees familiarize with blogs and will ease the process of implementing / launching an external blog.

In article that presents how and why Hill & Knowlton implemented two corporate blogs, Niall Cook devides bloggers into 4 categories (Figure 5):

a) the blogstar – the one who is motivated and can add value to the content;
b) the budding blogger – the one who is concentrated and motivated, but does not want to share knowledge with others;
c) the why bother blogger – the one who is nor motivated, neither knows what subject to adopt;
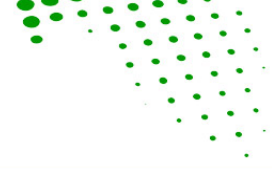d) the blogger beware – the one who is not concentrated, doesn't see the whole picture, but wishes to blog.

Figure 5

Use technical details for a successful blog

1. **Comments.** Write comments on other blogs. This helps you integrate in the online community and allow you to leave your address, so that you can direct visitors to your blog. Do not forget that some comments the users write need censorship, but if you censor all the negative comments you start to loose your credibility. The best way is to design a set of rules and to insert it on the first page.

2. **Tag.** Use tags, so that the information be well-structured and easy to find. These help you get a better position in the searching engines.

3. **Trackback.** Follow the trackbacks, the system that announces you when another blog has a post that contains a link to your blog. Thus you can obtain a general view about the image you have in the blogosphere and you can answer the comments / critics / encouragements in real time.

4. Do not forget that a blog's efficiency stands in some of the following factors: **number of users and node connections.** Blogs are implemented to achieve an efficiency in both domains: they contain many links – thus making the network visible. There are many websites that help you get a graphic representation of links (Opte Project, MyDensity.com) or build the path of an online conversation (Blogpulse, Technorati, PubSub).

5. **Place links.** A blog that does not offer links or a blogroll is isolated. Blogs' force stands in the community they create. Having a very large coverage rate in the virtual community, you can send a positive message to your readers.

6. **The blog has to contain a contact page or to offer an email address.** Building credibility and a transparent communication are crucial for the online medium. The lack of a contact possibility discourages the users, not letting them give feed back. If the reason you are afraid to put an email address is the concern regarding spam programms, you may compose it like this: name@domain.com, thus blocking the spam programs to find your personal address.

7. **Allow the users to leave comments.** The simple fact that there is an option that lets you comment on a post gives a positive message to the clients: the company is interested in hearing their opinions / propositions. More than that, blogs are communication tools, so if a blog is used only to present information and it does not allow the interaction, it is no different than a presentation page.

8. **Put RSS Feed.** In this way, you do not force the user to enter the URL of the blog every time a new post appears.

9. **Track blogs.** Different tracking methods are useful because they allow you to see who else from your industry is present in the blogosphere.

Fake/Imaginary Bloggers. How an invented character influences the image of the company

Persons writing on blogs can be real or invented. Or characters. Or animals. Or an entire department. Cases when it has been discovered the person signing the posts didn't really existed are not that rare. Because corporations are unsure and hesitate to enter directly in the blogosphere, they sometimes create fake blogs. These are written by the marketing or the PR department and have as a purpose the promotion of a product, service or brand, using a fake name or a fake character.

These pseudo-blogs are risky because many bloggers view them as an insult addressed to their community. Therefore, it is hard to state if the pseudo blogs are a threat or not (sometimes, bad publicity is still publicity), but it should be taken into account that they present risks.

Panasonic has launched in October 2005 DefPerception, a corporate blog written by a certain Tosh Bilowski. A "certain" because Bilowski pretended to be a real person. After more bloggers wondered where did he came from (no search engine gave any results with his name, there were no photos of him on the blog) and after a series of articles about this mysterious character, even the people handling the blog wrote a post, O Brother Who Art Thou, suggesting Tosh may be an invented character.

After a lot of publicity regarding his identity, Panasonic confessed that he was just an invented character that was supposed to interact with the persons viewing the blog about the video products AG-HVX200 and HD.

McDonald's created a blog with a French fry and integrated it into the Super Bowl campaign. "Captain Morgan runs a rum blog". Even that the blog was written by a French fry, the McDonald spokesman said that the blog had over 2 millions visitors and it kept the publicity alive. The posts of Captain Morgan were indeed read and the comments' rate was high (going once up to 159 comments per post).

A similar incident, but with not so favorable consequences, happened with Wal-Mart. The blog Walmarting Across America presented adventures of some persons traveling out through the USA and interviewing Wal-Mart workers. When it was found out that this blog was a fake, the persons not being real ones and this hole thing being a campaign paid by Wal-Mart, the company was accused to break the code of the Word of Mouth marketing. Richard Edelman, the person responsible for the campaign, excused himself in public.

Marqui Company, producer of web-marketing services, initiated a promotional program using bloggers. 20 bloggers have been selected and have been paid $2400 to write about Marqui once a week for 3 months.

The success of the program was guaranteed by the transparency and the sincerity (the list of bloggers, the rules and the sending materials were on the site; the selected persons could have criticized the products). After the first round of this program, the number of people who have visited the Marqui site went up from 2 000 to 150 000.
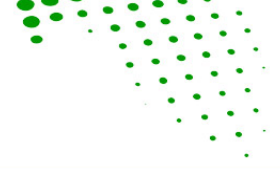
Cum măsori popularitatea blogurilor?

The big questions you should answer after having implemented the blog is this: How many other pages give a link to your blog? If the answer is not a promising one for the future of your blog, you have to think Search Engine Optimization.

Although there may be lots of websites that link your blog, not all these links have the same importance. The more out going links a web page has, the power rate of sent links for every page decreases. So your page gets a higher value from a web page that has only one link than from a page that send you to hundreds of other pages.

The Google searching algorithm takes into consideration the theme of the page. So, if your blog is about cosmetics, pages from the same domain placing a link to your web page will have a higher relevance than ones that talk about video cameras, for example. Also, if the links that you place send to posts you have written in the past, the rate of the new post is bigger.

The anchor link is one of the most powerful techniques in order to maximize the power of internal links. These refer to word that represent links to other web pages. So, instead of using "click here", "read more", try using descriptive words that concern the subject of the post.

Blogs can be tracked by Tehnocrati, a program registering the number of links.

In august 2006, Tehnocrati published a list with the most visited blogs and the blogs that have the highest number of links on other web pages (like the blog of the Chinese actress Xu Jinglei or the persons from Boing Boing).

The scientist from the MIT Media laboratory launched in 2001 a project named Blogdex, that gathers data from thousands of blogs in order to analyze blogs' social properties.

There are two ways through blogs' popularity can be measured: through links and through affiliation (like the blogroll). Although for a blog to become popular through blogroll it takes a longer period of time, permalinks can bring a faster popularity and are maybe more indicated to achieve credibility and success, since they show the fact that people actually read your post and find them valid and worthy to be mentioned.

Information for this project has been gathered for over 4 years and registered the most contagious ways of spreading information though the blogs. The project, no longer active, analyzed comments, permalinks, trackbacks and blogrolls as ways of creating a social bond. After having analyzed over 30 000 blogs, everyone having at least one link (in or out), results showed that although the curb of the blogroll is more abrupt, this meaning that the popularity gained from the blogrolls loses its force easier, results between the first and the lasts from the top, the general differences between the popularity of permalinks and blogrolls are not that big. (Figure 5)
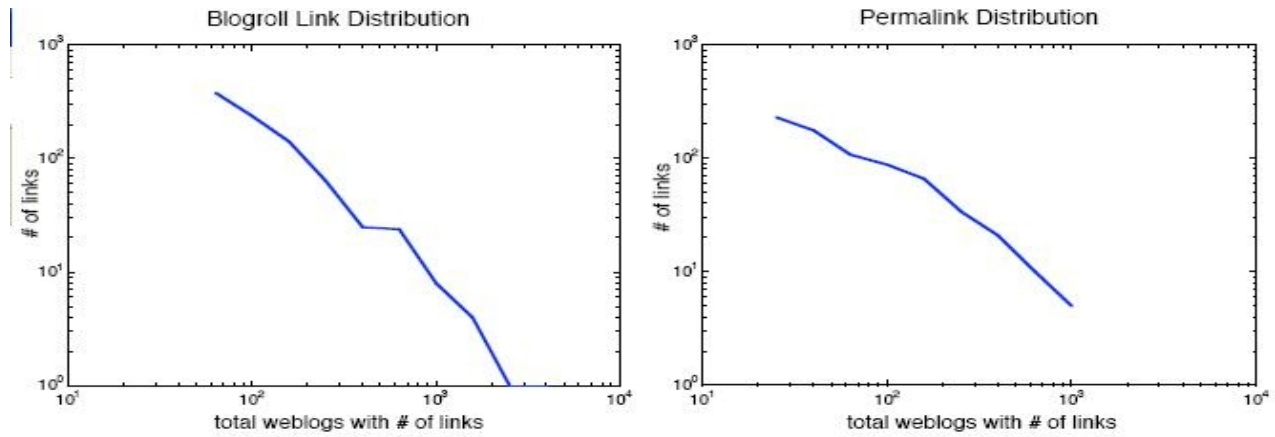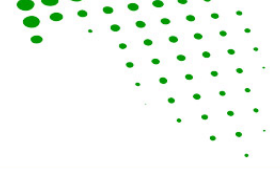
Figure 6

Conclusion

The blog as a promotional / interaction tool is part of the new generation of software applications. Although for the personal blogs the market is expanding, corporative blogs do not have an uniform coverage of the market.

Imagine this: when you contact a call service would you rather talk to a robot or to an employee? This goes out for your client too: when he opens the web page he might appreciate if he saw something else than a simple presentation catalog.
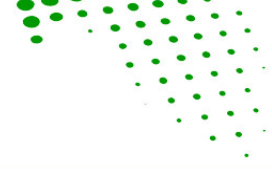
Resurse:

Behind The Scenes In Blogosphere. Advice From Established Bloggers – Umass Dartmouth: http://www.umassd.edu/cmr/

Corporate Blogging: Is It Worth The Hype? - Backbone Media: http://www.backbonemedia.com/

Blogging Success Study – Northeastern University & Backbone Media: http://www.scoutblogging.com/success_study/

Business Week Online (2005, 2 May) - http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_18/b3931007_mz001.htm?chan=search

The Economist (2006, 20 April) – It's the links, stupid!: http://www.economist.com/surveys/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6794172

Global PR Blog Week 2.0: http://www.globalprblogweek.com/

http://www.technorati.com/weblog/