
10 ways
your blog can provide
REAL VALUE
to you, your organization
and your brand
A guide from
social signal
based on the blog series
by Rob Cottingham

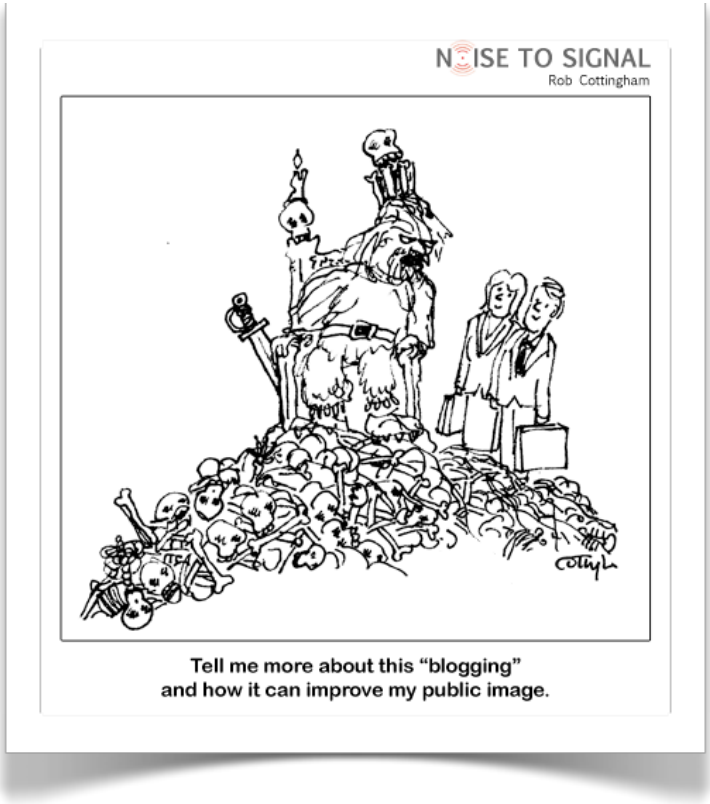


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Introduction: Getting real value from your blog

Times are tight, which is the polite way of saying that your communications budget has probably been handed to Freddy Krueger for a light trim. So whether your organization is already blogging, or just thinking about it, you need to make a strong case for your blog's ROI: the *return on investment* your organization can expect.



Here's how you can start: 10 ways that blogging provides real value to your organization, whether it's a company, non-profit, government agency or community group. And we're going to talk about how you can get blogging to go that extra mile for you, and wring out every drop of golden ROI from your posts... while staying true to the principles of authenticity and transparency that give social media so much of their power.

That may sound like a balancing act – but it in fact it isn't. Authenticity is actually what creates much of the value of blogging, and the relationships and conversations it engenders. And if there's one key thing to remember about the value of blogging to your organization, it's this:

> **Blogging gives your organization a way to have and host authentic, meaningful conversations with the people that matter most to it.**

Keep that basic principle in mind, and you'll be on the track to tangible value.

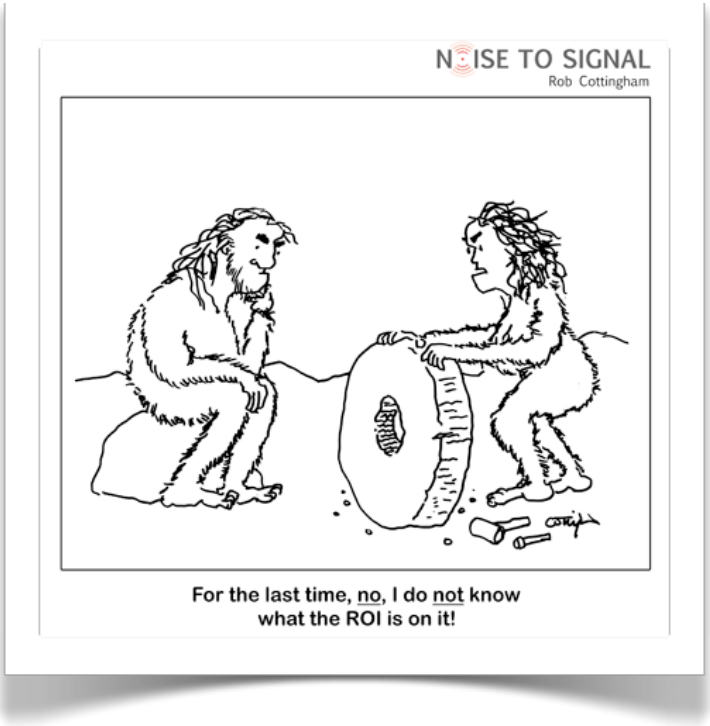
The 10 sources of value we'll look at in this e-book are:

- Showing your organization's human face
- Building skills and capacity
- Getting high-value feedback
- Creating an alternative to the news media
- Building relationships
- Communicating in a crisis
- Telling a story over time
- Turning readers into messengers
- Embracing openness
- Giving your online conversations a home

1. Put the I in ROI

Showing your organization's human face

Most organizational communications are impersonal. Vehicles like news releases speak with an institutional voice, and generally it's either flat and emotionless or full of PR hype. Either way, there's no trust and no connection between the communicator and the audience.



Even when individuals do step forward, it's almost always scripted, through speeches, news releases or canned corporate videos.

(The exception is when your CFO blurts a few offhand comments to reporters as they're being led away by the police, which – although compelling and humanizing – usually doesn't do a lot for trust either.)

Enter blogging. Whether the blogger is the CEO, an executive director, a senior manager, a frontline employee, a volunteer or even an intern hired expressly to blog, they're going to put a human face on your organization. They'll be talking in a conversational voice and casting your organization's work in the light of their own perceptions and experience.

How does that help you? There's a saying that it's harder to be angrier at a real person than a faceless organization. Now, that isn't exactly true; think of how you felt about your ex right after your last godawful breakup, compared to how you feel about, say, the Owens Corning corporation. But it's fair to say that it's easier to identify with a person than with a faceless organization.

And once that identification has happened, real communication becomes possible.

Here are some ways you can stress the personal on your organizational blog:

- Have one or two people who are the lead bloggers on the site. Let them set the tone, voice and personality of the blog.
- Make sure your bloggers are writing under their own names, not a pseudonym. It's easier to gain trust if you're willing to show a little yourself – and a real name is the least you can offer.
- A thumbnail photo of each post's author can have a big impact. We connect emotionally with faces.
- Blog with personality and an attitude – in the sense of expressing some kind of emotional reaction to what you're writing about.
- Keep the tone conversational. Passive voice, corporate jargon, financial buzzwords – lose them in favour of plain

language. By all means, use appropriate technical terms if you're talking to an audience that uses them too... but aim for the kind of language friends use over coffee. And by coffee, I mean beer.

- Share a little. Hint at having a personal life: pets, hobbies, interests outside of work.

- Understand there are boundaries. Don't overdisclose – chances are any blog post that begins "I got *so trashed* last night" isn't going to end well for your or your organization. And don't disclose personal details you wouldn't want splashed all over the web.

You'll know you're getting a good return when you see pay-offs like...

- More positive mentions from other bloggers, often referring to your organization's blogger by name – ideally, their first name. For businesses, look especially for mentions associated with purchases of your product; for non-profits, look for references to donating and links to your donation page. In each case, these tell you if there's a link between positive word-of-mouth and actual take-it-to-the-bank money.

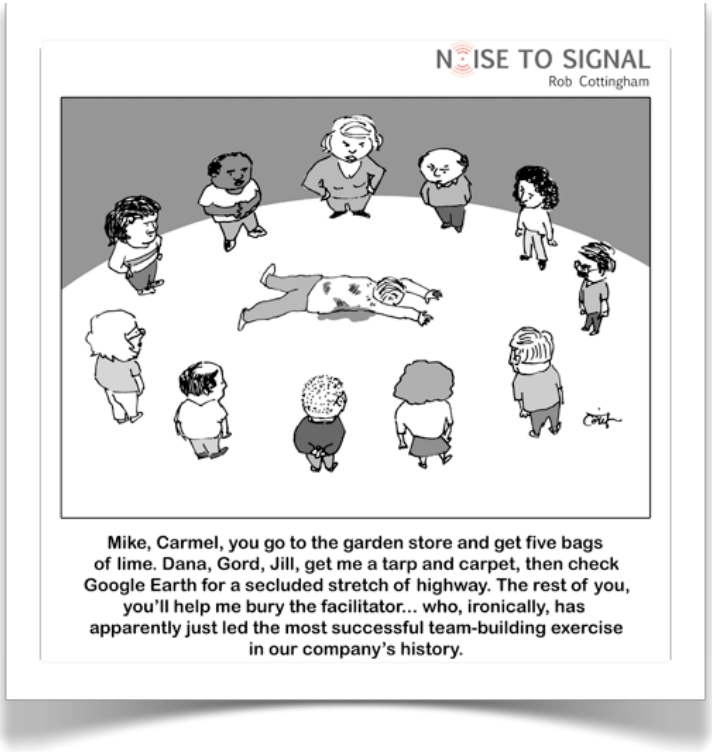
- Fewer customer complaints aired on blogs, possibly accompanied by some increase in incoming questions to your bloggers (who will become your first line of defense until you figure out a customer service 2.0 offering).

- More traffic to your site coming from links on other blogs.

2. Training

Skills development

Social media should be a no-brainer. After all, it's all about conversation and relationships – and in fact our conversational instincts can serve us well in blogging, podcasting, social networking and other social media channels.



Instinct alone, however, won't suffice. You need skills, knowledge and experience to succeed in social media – from tech chops, to the unique demands of various social media venues, to the social nuances of dealing with conflict between online antagonists.

You can develop those social media muscles with training (self-directed or with a teacher), by watching others and – most important – through practice.

And "practice" in more than one sense: learning involves making mistakes, sometimes big ones. Those can be hard enough to swallow if you're communicating as an individual, although you'll find a lot of people willing to cut some slack for teh n00bs.

But when you're out there on behalf of your organization, there may be more at stake. People are less forgiving of institutions than individuals, and depending on your organization's profile, the damage to its reputation could be significant.

That's where your blog comes in. Smaller in scale, more manageable in scope and simpler in concept than more ambitious social media projects, your blog can be the perfect place to build your skills and experience – and those of your embryonic social media team.

Here are some of the ways you can make your blog serve as a training platform as well as a conversational communications channel:

- Go in prepared. Yes, it's a training ground – but it's also happening in the full light of day. So before you begin, give yourself a grounding in blogging by reading other blogs, commenting on them, and seeing what appeals to you and what doesn't. Consider blogging behind closed doors for a little while before going public, and you'll not only start settling into a consistent voice, but you'll have a solid body of posts to show the world.

- The same applies to team members. They don't have to be seasoned hands, but be sure they know some of the basics before you give them the keys. (And by "the basics", I mean about blogging generally ... but also about your blog's goals, tone, policies and culture.)

- Assemble your blogging team with some thought to the future. Choose folks you'd like to develop as potential social media team members, and let them try on different roles – from writers to community animators to editorial managers – and discover their strengths. And if you'd like to try someone on for size and see how they adapt, bring them on as a guest blogger for a little while.

- Set learning goals and milestones for yourself and your team, and take them seriously. Plan a curriculum that includes self-guided study, practical experience and – if you have the budget – formal training. And think strategically. What skills do you need not just as a blogger, but as a manager and strategist? Learn about analytics, conversions and calls to action.

- Look to the future: what kind of social media initiative will your organization likely want to pursue? Draft your blog's roadmap in a way that will take you in helpful directions, anticipating and honing the skills that will serve you well when the time comes – by adding the odd video or audio clip if a podcast is in your future, for instance.

- Look for overlap. Think about your organization's training needs; where do they map onto some of the skills you and your team members can develop through the blog?

- Build a peer social network on Twitter, LinkedIn or other services, and ask questions. There's a strong sense of community among social media types, and asking for help with a technical issue or a pointer to a resource will almost always get you – if not the definitive answer – a solid starting point.

- Share what you learn among your team, and broaden it to your organization. Holding lunch and learns, lightning sessions or monthly seminars can help spread the knowledge about tools and strategies. Alternatively, social bookmarking, a wiki or an internal blog can let you organize your collective expertise and share that blog or podcast you just discovered.

- Offer training opportunities to the rest of your organization. An internal internship on your blog could help a customer care rep learn more about engagement, a marketing manager get a handle on social media culture, or your ED's speechwriter brush up her conversational chops.

Here's how you'll know you're creating a high-value training platform:

- You have a clear picture in your head of exactly what skills and knowledge your team has, where you need to improve, and where individual members' strengths lie.

- Blogging, blog monitoring and other social media activities are faster and easier, because they're becoming second nature.

- Team members' performance assessments show improvements in areas related to their social media activities, such as facilitation, collaboration and communication.

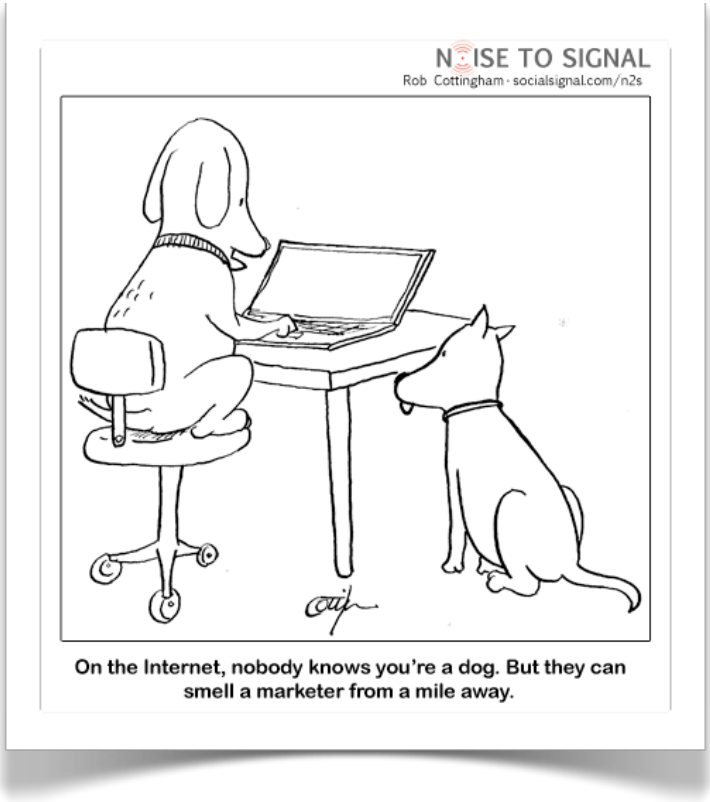
- You and your team members start trying out new skills, because you've mastered the old ones.

- You've developed a network of people – peers, mentors, prospective new hires – you can count on for sharing ideas, knowledge and support.

3. Get into the feedback loop

Getting high-value feedback

Think for a moment about how much your organization spends to find out what your audience, supporters, stakeholders and community are thinking.



Maybe you're doing opinion polling or focus groups. Maybe you have labs where your prospective customers are testing your newest products and services. Maybe you've hired consultants to mine your customer service logs for golden nuggest of insight.

Maybe you're just thinking of getting a psychic on staff. (Hey, we're located in Vancouver; we can hook you up with someone.)

Feedback is tremendously valuable stuff. And you don't just want to hear reactions to what you're doing and saying; you want to know what's on your audience's mind about the whole range of subjects that could touch on your organization's products, services or mission.

Enter blogging. More to the point, blog comments -- where your readers respond to your posts and, often, alert you to issues, opinions and ideas you need to know about. Sometimes you'll find a valuable gem in response to something you've said; other times, a side conversation between readers will reveal an important insight; and on still other occasions, people will volunteer something to you from out of the blue.

These are things you aren't going to hear through the feedback form on your web site. There is a lot that your audience will share with an actual person -- especially someone they feel they have a relationship with -- that they'd never even think of dropping into your virtual suggestion box.

Some suggestions for getting valuable feedback through your blog:

- Make it clear what kind of feedback you're looking for, and what you can't help with. There's no sense having people leave tech support questions for your company's Squidinator 2000 if you have no way of dealing with them.
- Thank people for their comments, critical and positive. And be genuinely grateful: they've given up a little of their time and attention to help your organization be more effective.

- Engage with commenters, including the negative ones. It's a way of compensating people for that time they're giving up – and for keeping the comments flowing.
- Recognize that complaints are at least as valuable as kudos. One legitimate complaint on your blog could well represent dozens, even hundreds of people who are fuming in silence. Fix that problem, and you could make a lot of people happy. That said...
- Recognize when a commenter is just being abusive; no law says you have to play with bullies. Don't feel like you have to respond to them, either. The other readers on your blog will recognize inappropriate behaviour for what it is.
- Be sure your organization buys into the idea that you'll be allowing critical comments as well as favorable ones. That's the table stakes of blogging – and the minimum level of openness you need to get honest, useful feedback.
- Know the limits to what your organization can accept, and make those clear on your blog. You don't want your users to feel they've had the rug pulled out from underneath them when and if you need to edit or delete an inappropriate comment.
- As you develop a relationship with your blog's readers, start asking them directly for feedback. Float a trial balloon; point them to your latest online ad campaign; ask them about their lives and the problems you can help them to solve. Just remember that you're doing all of this in public.
- Offer more than one way to give feedback. Blog comments are great – but consider inviting your readers to take polls, post on their own blogs about a particular subject, or upload a YouTube video with a unique tag. You'll get more diverse input, and potentially expose your blog to a wider audience.
- Don't let your blog get overrun with comment spam; it can drive out real people faster than anything else you might do. Invest in a service like Akismet or Mollom if you find yourself overwhelmed.
- Remember that your readers, valued and wonderful though they are, are in no way representative of your broader audience or constituency. Don't take their input as gospel. And remember what Henry Ford was reported to have said: if he'd asked people what they wanted, they would have said "faster horses". (Actually, in retrospect, that might have been for the best... but you get his point.)
- Find channels to update your organization's decision-makers on what you're hearing on your blog. No matter how high the quality of feedback, it's worthless if it isn't heard and acted on. And when your organization does act on it, let your readers (especially the one or ones who offered the relevant feedback) know about it.

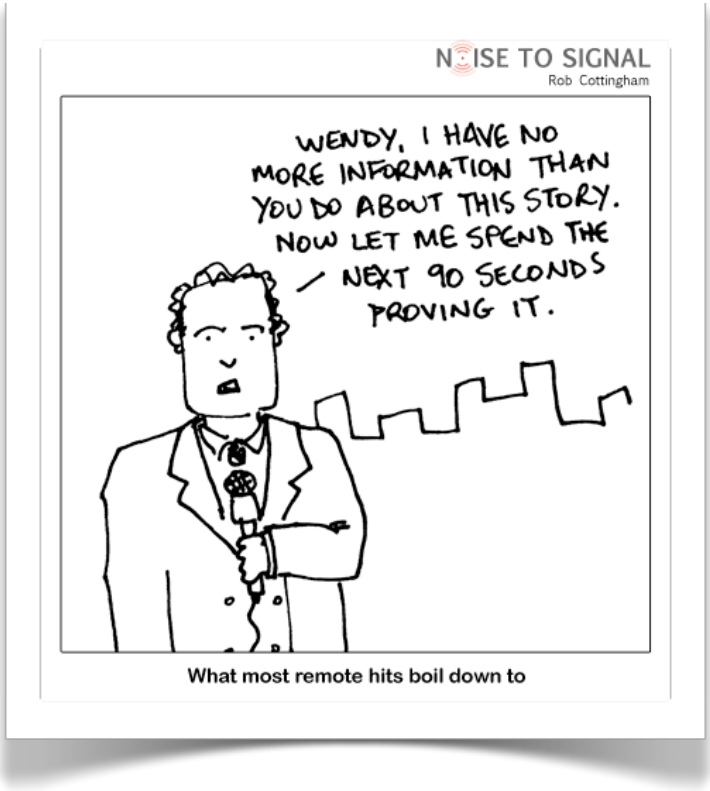
You'll know you're getting valuable feedback when:

- You're bringing up blog comments at business meetings.
- A co-worker asks you to run an idea past your blog audience.
- Others in your organization mention blog comments they've read to you.
- Your colleagues start asking for more frequent feedback updates.
- The feedback is resulting in identifiable changes and improvements in the way you operate (such as fewer complaints to customer service).

4. Throw out that news release

An alternative to news media

Many organizations have only two ways to talk to the public about the issues that matter to them: advertising, and mass media – often through a news release.



Ads, of course, cost money. So the answer is frequently to pump out news releases... lots of news releases. And any reporter can tell you that the vast majority of news releases that come across their desks aren't worth the three seconds they spend on the monitor before the reporter hits the "delete" key. The perverse result is that communications shops, seeing so few of their news releases ever making it onto the front page or into a newscast, try to increase their odds by... issuing more news releases.

A lot of communications professionals are more savvy and subtle than that, of course. They'll try to place op-eds in newspapers, get spokespeople clipped on the evening news, or talk reporters into covering a particular angle.

And sometimes it works. But the hard truth is that a lot of what you have to say isn't actually newsworthy as far as the mass media is concerned... even if it might be interesting to an important sector of your audience.

That's where your blog comes in. Your reflections on a news story that affects your organization can fit in perfectly. So can an anecdote about how customers are finding a new use for your product, or a behind-the-scenes look at how you're taking extraordinary steps to fill orders despite, say, a weather crisis.

Stories that are too small to capture an assignment editor's imagination can still get some precious attention from your audience. And a blog can be the channel that gets out a message which may not have any value to a metropolitan daily, but is worth the world to your organization.

Sometimes, your story actually will work for reporters. But when it doesn't...

...here are some suggestions for using your blog as an alternative to mass media:

- **Understand the basics.** Know your audience, your goals and your message before you even start to think about what channel to use – including your blog.
- **Show restraint.** Resist the temptation to shovel everything your organization wants to get "out there" into your blog,

and think of your blog's readers. Is this a story that will resonate with them? Will it entertain, inform or offer value to them?

- **Remember the medium.** Blogs – nearly all of the good ones, anyway – are conversational and personal. This isn't the place for cut-and-paste jobs; an authentic human voice is crucial to success. And once you've posted, be ready to respond to reactions from your readers.

- **Equip your readers.** Feeds, social bookmarking tools and send-to-a-friend features can help them spread the word quickly and easily. And...

- **Respect your readers.** They're here to engage with good stories, useful information and real people. For them, passing along your message is a by-product – something they'll do either because the content is compelling, or because they like you (or like to be associated with you).

- **Monitor the results and join the conversation.** Posting something on your blog isn't the end of the process – it's just the beginning. You need to actively monitor the social media world for reaction to what you've said, and wherever appropriate, reply to it and keep the conversation going.

That gives you two things: a new relationship with a blogger or commenter, and a way to begin tracking the communication impact your blog is having.

- **Keep the door open to the mainstream media.** If one of your post has had real traction – a lot of comments, say, and a lot of links from the outside world – you suddenly have a powerful argument for an assignment editor's attention.

You'll know you're getting value from this channel when:

- Your readership begins to rise, and you know you're reaching people.

- Other blogs begin linking to you and reposting.

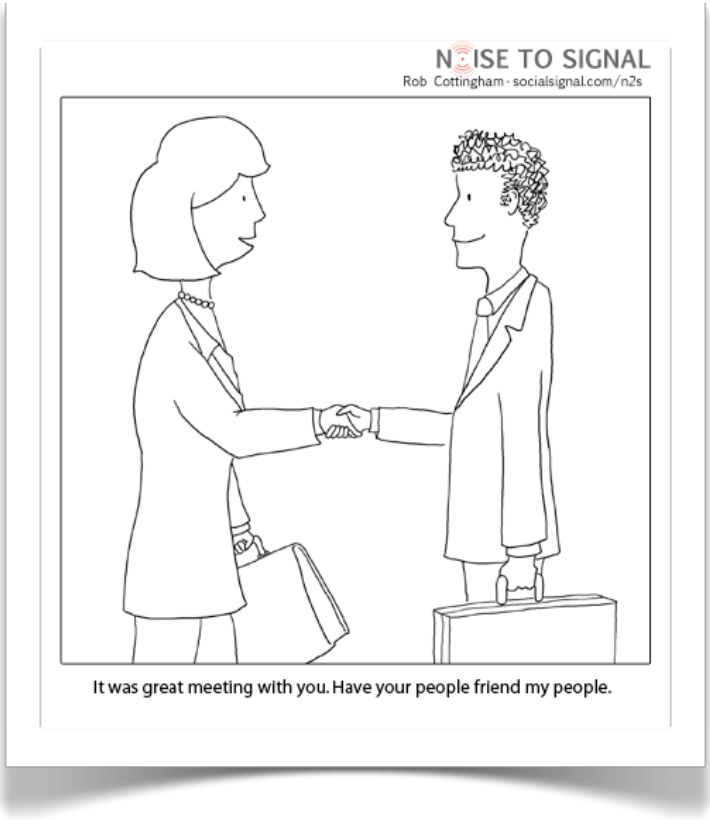
- You deliver a message exclusively through your blog, and start hearing it repeated back to you through another channel.

- Quotes from your blog start turning up in the mainstream media, and reporters call to ask you about something they've read on your blog.

5. You can relate

Building relationships

Most traditional communications and marketing stresses top-down flows: pushing out a message, and interrupting whatever your audience members would rather be doing to get it through to them. Feedback from your audience typically comes in the form of metrics, impressions, survey results and – if it all works out – the desired response to your call to action.



What's missing is human-to-human connection.

Blogging can help change that. It allows you to open a conversation, find areas of common ground, develop trust – and ultimately build a relationship.

Relationships can be valuable for both parties. They can get you through tough times: a kink in your supply chain, a cash flow crunch or a safety recall (peanuts, anyone?). Customers, supporters or members of the public who trust you are willing to give you more leeway, more time to solve problems, more benefit of the doubt. They're more likely to give you honest feedback, pass along valuable suggestions... and take your brand out into the world, and make it their own.

They might even stick with you if your prices are a little higher than the competition's.

And the value doesn't end with external relationships. Building links within your organization is at least as important. Those relationships can break down internal silos, bridge departmental divisions and cultural factions, create organizational resilience and surprise you with innovations and insights.

Blogging helps build those relationships because you're speaking with a real human voice, and because you're listening – the two critical ingredients of a genuine conversation.

Here's how to make the most of it:

- **Enter conversations as yourself, not as *The Organization*.** Use your real name and upload an avatar photo. That doesn't mean you pretend to be someone off the street who just so happens to have a passionate interest in Flegmar Steel-Reinforced Cupcakes Inc.
- **Make your affiliation clear.** Let your readers know where you're coming from, so you start your relationship off on the right foot.

- **Wear your listening ears.** Watch your posts for comments, and monitor the wider social media world with tools like Technorati and Google Blog Search.

- **Open your hailing frequencies.** Turn on commenting, and if at all possible, let posts go live before you moderate them. (A spam-fighting tool like Akismet or Mollom can help you loosen those reins.) It's a sign of trust on your part... trust you want your readers to reciprocate.

- **Answer promptly.** When people do comment on your posts, reply to them – and not just a generic "Thanks for your thoughts." Engage them the same way you might in conversation: asking for more details, offering your take on what they've said, inviting another reply.

- **Talk about your readers as well as with them.** Mention readers by name in subsequent blog posts, and credit them for the ideas they've offered. The same goes for bloggers who've posted about your blog.

- **Take an interest.** Ask people questions directly and, if your growing relationship makes it appropriate, start venturing into personal territory: shared interests, concerns and challenges.

- **Knock on their doors.** If someone's commenting about you on their blog or social media presence, strike up a conversation with them there. Think of it as dropping by for coffee.

- **Give a little link love.** Linking to their posts from your blog is a way of giving them a little public attention (plus traffic), as well as paying them a compliment: you think they've posted something worth paying attention to. That can go a surprisingly long way in building your relationship.

You'll know you're building those high-value relationships when:

- Bloggers and readers begin talking about your organization and brand in the context of their relationship with you.

- Your conversations are growing in density, with longer exchanges and more repeat visits.

- More people are talking about you and your organization, and they're talking about you more often.

- People you first encounter on the blog develop relationships with you on other sites or – especially with internal blogs – in the workplace.

- You find yourself posting and hoping particular individuals comment...

- ...and they do.

6. Firefighting

Crisis communications

You'll never find your communications skills put to the test more strenuously than during a crisis. Even the best of organizations feels the strain when a crisis hits, whether it's a scandal, a service interruption, a product recall or a natural disaster.



Yet crises are exactly the time when good communications can make an enormous difference. You need to convey clear, consistent messages and information to the people who need it... and you need to be listening well enough to know whether those messages are getting through and having an impact. And, as all of that swirls around you, you need to know if the situation out there has changed, and if so, how to react.

What's at stake? The goodwill of your audience, your relationships with decision-makers, your entire brand reputation, even the personal safety and well-being of your customers – depending on the situation, it could all be in jeopardy. So when we're thinking about ROI, that's some tangible value you're defending.

Relying on the media to get the word out can be a dicey bet. Your agenda isn't the same as a reporter's, and whether it's through an editorial decision or a misunderstanding, your message can get seriously garbled by the time it hits the front page or the evening news. And that's assuming the news cycle is fast enough to reach people with timely information.

That's not to say you shouldn't turn to the mass media – you almost certainly should. If your crisis is big enough, they'll be talking about it, and you want to be part of that conversation. But they'll be editing, interpreting and filtering – and even if your key message emerges intact, you're unlikely to deliver much detail or context that way.

With a blog, on the other hand, you get to communicate the whole message. It stays up 24-7, so you don't have to worry that your audience missed a newscast. And you can link to resources and detailed facts, giving people access to as much information as they need.

Better yet, it's instantaneous: you aren't waiting on anyone's editorial schedule. That can be critical in a quickly evolving situation, when an urgent update has to reach people *now*. Some of those people – including reporters – will be happy to be able to follow the situation via your RSS feed, giving them real-time updates.

But perhaps just as much value comes from the fact that you get feedback, in the form of comments and trackbacks, from the people you're reaching. They can let you know when the information you're giving them isn't adequate, isn't clear enough or doesn't ring true. If your relationship with them is strong enough, they may alert you to online critics and media coverage you hadn't come across. And they may well rebroadcast your message through their own channels – this time with the added weight of their implicit endorsement.

Here are some of the ways you can get the most value from your blog in a crisis:

- This chapter can't begin take the place of a crisis communications strategy – but your plan should be a fully integrated part of that strategy. Make sure you have the full buy-in of your communications leadership now... because convincing them in the middle of a crisis is a lot harder.

- There's conflicting advice out there on whether you should use an existing blog for crisis communications, or prep a dedicated blog ready to launch whenever it's needed. My advice: create a category on your current blog for crisis posts, with its own feed. (If you think it's necessary to have a dedicated crisis blog, use that feed to populate a separate blog.) That way you can draw on your existing relationship capital when the time comes, while still maintaining a dedicated channel for crisis updates.

- Have a crisis blogging plan in place now, when you have the luxury of time (and the clear-headedness that's hard to find when your fight-or-flight mechanism is in full cry). Lay down the wiring for either a blog category or a dedicated blog; set out the protocol for deciding when crisis blogging is in operation, and when it comes to an end; decide who will write crisis blog posts (and what happens to regular blogging for the duration of the crisis); what levels of crisis you'll plan for (some demand the full weight of your communications apparatus; others may require very narrow channels) and work out a streamlined process for any approvals that might be needed.

- When the crisis hits, activate the plan, and be sure that everyone connected to the blog knows it... including your audience. Let them know it won't be business as usual for a while, and that this is the place to come for the very latest news and information.

- Manage expectations around engagement and responding to comments. If it looks like the person who normally manages the blog is going to be sucked into the larger communications maelstrom, let your readers know it may take longer to get back to them. But...

- Leave comments and trackbacks on if at all possible... and ask your readers for their feedback and questions. Explain you may not be able to get back to everyone individually, but that you'll try to answer as many questions as possible, including the most urgent.

- If the flow of questions is overwhelming, don't even try to reply one by one. Instead, take a few minutes to cluster the questions into themes, and then address those – possibly in the form of an FAQ, with an emphasis on answers to the most frequently-aseked, important and urgent questions.

- If you realize a previous blog post is in error, or worse is fueling or even causing the crisis, don't give in to the temptation to go back and change history. By all means correct the mistake – please – but do it in a transparent way; combination of strikeout text through the error and a correction styled for emphasis will serve you better than trying to fudge things. Your reputation is already on the line, and this is the the worst time to risk it.

- Let your readers know how they can help. Encourage them to spread the word, especially if you're dealing with rumours or misinformation. Arming them with facts rather than spin, and positive rather than negative messages, increases the likelihood that they'll be enthusiastic and

effective communicators on your behalf. (And never hang your readers out to dry. Don't equip them with a message that won't stand up to scrutiny; they'll end up looking like idiots, and they'll never forgive you.)

- Give your readers a peek behind the scenes. Let them see the human face of your efforts, the people who are working day and night to resolve the situation and get things back to normal. It's a lot easier to be patient with Cathy, who's plowing tirelessly through a stack of customer complaints, than with Humongous Impersonal Company Inc.

- After things settle down, give your readers a debriefing. If your organization was at fault, apologize; if not, commiserate. Tell the entire story, including the causes of the crisis, the steps you took to resolve it and what you're doing to keep it from happening again. And if your readers are part of that story, give them plenty of credit and thanks for their role.

And here are four ways you'll know your blog has helped see you through the storm:

- Your readers thank you for keeping them informed
- Your messages are picked up on other blogs
- Your responses show up as rebuttals to your critics
- You emerge from the crisis with more readers, a more engaged community and stronger relationships

7. Spinning yarns

Telling a story over time

Not every story fits in a few neat paragraphs – especially stories that are still unfolding. Maybe you're taking on a major advocacy project. Adding a green roof to your office building. Or tracking an intern's apprenticeship in the skills and culture of your industry.



Either way, you have a story that can engage readers over an extended period: weeks, months or even years. And when it's a story that reinforces your brand and engages readers, you have something with the potential for real value... if you can tell it to them.

But telling that story through traditional channels can be difficult. Advertising is expensive, and it's a major commitment to devote an extended ad buy to one story; news media, while they may cover you from time to time, almost certainly won't broadcast every development – and there's no guarantee they won't lost interest.

A blog, on the other hand, lets you tell an extended story easily. Devoted readers can follow every development via RSS; others can check in from time to time. And if your story is a compelling one, you can build an audience over time – people joining you halfway through can experience it from the beginning, thanks to your blog's archives.

Commenting allows readers to become part of the story, whether it's by cheering from the sidelines, as active participants with offers of help and support, or as story-tellers in their own right, inspired by your tale. That's the kind of engagement traditional media can't offer.

Here's how to put extended story-telling to work on behalf of your organization and your brand:

- Tell the right story. You're looking for something aligned with your brand (which doesn't have mean a story about your brand itself, but rather a story that reflects its underlying attributes and values). You want something that's interesting to your readers, and can sustain that interest over time. And you want a story that you can tell well – where you have ongoing access to the people involved, so you're delivering first-hand information to your readers.

- Look for concrete details. Any good storyteller looks for those nuggets of tangible, sensory detail: the way snow squeaks under a construction worker's boots in extreme cold, the tangy aroma of cilantro hitting a frying pan, the

papery-thin skin of an elderly woman's hand clasping yours. Used judiciously, they can bring a story to life.

- Use photos, audio and video. They can often tell your story more efficiently and more evocatively than text. The right sound or image can quickly engage a reader's senses and emotions, and impart a sense of immediacy and shared experience – especially when we're seeing people's faces and hearing their voices.

- Stories are ultimately about people. Find the people behind your story, and let us hear their voices. A choice sentence quoted from someone at the heart of the story can do much more for you than paragraph after paragraph of factoids or statistics. Pair it with a photo, and you can deliver something with real power. And don't feel like you have to bring in someone new in each post; seeing how someone's situation and perspective change over time can be one of the most engaging parts of a story.

- Stories are also about conflict. What are the opposing forces in this story? Who are we cheering for... and against? The "villain" doesn't have to be a person or organization; often, we're fighting against time, a natural disaster, illness or a social condition.

- Identify your theme. Usually a particular story speaks to some deeper idea... hopefully, one that has a lot to do with your brand or mission. That theme should help keep you on track as you tell your story... as well as helping you find echoes of your theme on other blogs that can open up opportunities for engagement and conversation with them.

- Welcome the new reader. You want to build your audience over time – so it shouldn't be hard for someone to get up to speed on your story. That might be hopeless with, say, Lost... but you can include a sidebar with an overview of the story so far, linking to a more detailed summary page. And consider offering an occasional "the story so far" post.

- Involve your readers in the story. Can they suggest something – a name for a new building? Can they collect questions to pose to the people at the centre of the story? Encourage conversations about the story in your blog's comments, and keep those conversations going with your replies. And if your readers can have an impact on the story's outcome – by raising funds, for example, or lending some volunteer labour for an afternoon – find a way to make that possible.

And here are three ways to tell when your storytelling is building toward a happy ending for you and your organization:

- Your story's audience is building over time, enhancing this channel and extending your reach.

- Your readers begin talking about the story and the underlying brand values, on your blog and elsewhere in the social web.

- Other channels – including the news media – pick up on the story.

8. Psst! Pass it on!

Turning readers into messengers

When you're talking about yourself, your brand or your organization, you may have first-person credibility... but you also have a pretty obvious conflict of interest. Add that to the growing distrust of advertising and public relations – in fact, of institutional communications generally – and you have a challenge.



Word-of-mouth marketing

These days, your audience is putting much more trust in their personal networks: their friends, family, neighbours and colleagues. When they hear a personal message from someone they know, it punches through in a way that organizational communications can't.

Blogging can help connect you to the power of those personal networks. It gives you a vehicle for bringing content to your audience in a way that makes it easy – sometimes even irresistible – to pass along to the people they know.

But here's the thing: they often don't just pass your message along. Your readers aren't automatons; they're active participants in a conversation, and they'll transform your content – sometimes in ways you never anticipated.

And you don't get to pick which messages get disseminated and which don't; a blog's audience chooses those for themselves. The content that gets sent around is the stuff they find compelling – the message they're motivated to run with.

If you think that sounds like you're giving up a lot of control, you aren't wrong. But what you lose in control, you gain in power and reach. The unexpected twists that can drive a traditionally-minded brand manager wingy are exactly what lend the weight of personal authenticity – and engagement – to the results.

Here's how to enable your readers to be effective, motivated messengers on your behalf:

- The readers who are most likely to bring your message (or, rather, their take on it) into the world are the ones who feel some level of personal investment in your organization or brand. It won't be hard to recognize them; on your blog and on others, they'll be the ones sticking up for and encouraging others to check you out. Build relationships with them.

- Your critics are also worth talking to, at least the reasonable ones, and not just to keep them from saying "That organization wouldn't even reply to me." Whether they have good-faith complaints about you, or their beef with you comes from a misunderstanding, talking with them can be the first step toward building a positive relationship.

- Don't waste too much time trying to deliberately create content that will "go viral" – that is, turn into one of those memes that flashes across the web like a wildfire across dry prairie. Instead, concentrate on offering great content: engaging stories, unique perspectives, entertainment or practical information.

- Make it easy for your readers to tell your story. Include logos, photos and video and audio clips... along with permission to not just reuse, but remix them as they please; the Creative Commons Non-Commercial Attribution license is your friend. Even easier, adding a single snippet of code to your blog template will generate one-click links that let users share your posts with every major content-sharing site on the web. (Here's an alternate service for the same kind of one-click sharing.)

- Offer full-text news feeds (aka RSS feeds) from your site, so your readers can get whole blog posts in their newsreaders. Many of them, especially power users, have set up workflows to let them quickly share posts in Google Reader or similar services with their friends.

- There may come a time when you wouldn't just like your readers to pass your content along – you need it. Go right ahead and ask them; be transparent about what you're hoping to achieve, and suggest ways they can most effectively deliver the goods. Just be sure your tone makes it clear that you're asking for help and making suggestions, not giving orders.

- Be ready for unexpected, even hostile uses of your content (especially if you work in a contentious or competitive arena). Greet them graciously as part of the conversation without making a huge deal about them, and they likely won't overshadow your message.

- Choose messages and content that people will want to convey. News releases, talking points and marketing-speak won't work with any but your most dyed-in-the-wool supporters (and you should in fact have a separate strategy for working with them). You'll get a lot more traction with engaging, compelling content that gives readers and their friends some kind of value.

- Include calls to action in your content – the kind you can track, like a landing page with an URL keyed to a particular blog post. The results will give you clear metrics... and if you've chosen a call to action with tangible value, a simple way to calculate ROI.

- Measure your reach by tracking searches on Google, Technorati, Twitter and other services. Get a baseline for the metrics that count for you, and then monitor what's working and what isn't. Experiment, watch and learn, and you'll find your viral reach growing.

You'll know you're getting value when:

- You see your content reinforcing your brand and messages – not on your site, but in the blogs and social media streams of your readers.

- You see that content being reproduced by people you weren't aware of before.

9. Open wide...

Embracing openness

There's a convergence going on, and it revolves around the word "open." Whether it's open-source software, or enormous information repositories that are open to be accessed and sometimes even edited by anyone, or the growing requirements for transparency on the part of organizations and governments, your customers, supporters and audience are expecting you to be open to them.



Not just in the sense of open-minded, or having a contact form on your web site. But open in the sense that they know what you're doing, how it affects them, and why. That your organization's leadership is available and accountable. That they can engage with you as peers.

Books like *Wikinomics* and *Tactical Transparency* explain not only the forces driving the trend toward openness, but the real value that businesses and other organizations can gain when they let in some sunshine. Freeing some of your intellectual property, for instance, can allow your users to run with it – sometimes as brand ambassadors, other times as analysts who generate new and unexpected insights for you. And opening up internally, by creating a place for conversation that cuts across departmental walls, can give your organization new opportunities to collaborate.

Even the more intimidating aspects of openness, like the increased accountability it imposes, can be positive when it keeps organizations true to their mission and their brand values – and aligned with the communities they serve.

There's a lot more to openness than blogging, of course. But a blog can be the way your organization opens the windows a crack, sniffs the air outside and decides whether to go further.

Here's how to start opening up:

- Nobody's expecting you to run naked through the digital streets – and certainly not right off the bat. Get buy-in from your organization, start small, and open up gradually... validating what you've done at every step.
- Your first step can be a modest one: bringing in a manager as a guest blogger, for example, available to respond to reader comments and questions about their area of responsibility. A successful outing there can lead to more ambitious efforts later on.
- Focus your efforts on relevant openness – things that actually matter to your readers. And aim at first for the areas with the least controversy and risk, while you build up your

organization's comfort level (and your own knowledge of your community of readers and commenters.)

- Openness is as much about getting to know people as it is about hard facts and controversial issues. Introduce your readers to the behind-the-scenes folks who make things happen. If those people are willing, give your readers access to them with a Q & A or live chat on your blog.

- Let your readers in on what goes on backstage. Take them through the process of making that hot new product you're selling, or walk them through the processing of a donation all the way to where it makes a difference out in the world.

- Share your challenges. Is the economic downturn causing breaks or bottlenecks in your supply chain that are causing delivery delays? Has heightened interest in your organization meant a slow web server or site outages? Be the first to tell that story to your readers, before they hear it from others or experience it themselves; they'll appreciate the candor, and respond well to your lack of defensiveness.

- Anticipate the risks of openness: backlash, criticism and tough questions. Plan in advance for how you can deal with them, so a brief spark doesn't have the time to flare into something more destructive.

- "Open" doesn't mean "floodgates". You probably have reams of data you could share on your blog, from the cafeteria's daily specials to the new guidelines for office allocation. Be judicious, and choose the information that will mean the most to the people you want to reach.

- If you have an especially thorny problem, consider throwing it open to your readers. Be very clear about the kind of help you'd like, so you can focus their contributions and ideas where they'll actually be useful.

- When the time comes to make a decision that affects your readers, use your blog as consult them

- Try to make your organization's logo and wordmark available for reuse (perhaps under a Creative Commons license), and post them to your blog. Invite your readers to use them, even to remix them, when they're talking about your organization. Do the same with photos of your organization's leadership, audio and video clips of products or services in action, and other digital assets that your readers can run with.

- Do at least as much listening as talking, and build the reflex of responding with access. If you're seeing a lot of blog chatter or reading a lot of comments about a particular issue, find ways to open up around it – by exposing some of your internal conversations about the issue, for example, or inviting a conversation between your readers and some of your organization's key people.

- Look for ways to bring people inside – both virtually and in the physical world. Hold a meetup in your offices, or a townhall with your organization's key leaders. And complete the circle by linking it to the online world – for instance, via a Twitter feed or liveblog of the conversation.

You'll know that openness is starting to pay off when:

- Your research and monitoring show an increase in public perception and description of your organization as open, accessible and accountable.

- Ideas from your blog's readers start getting discussed in your organization, and taken seriously.

- Your organization steps back from the brink of a bad decision because of concern over how it will be received in the community. And your organization takes a courageous good decision for exactly the same reason.

- Internal collaboration starts to cut across silos, as the culture of openness soaks in.

- People in your organization start to approach you with things they'd like to ask or share with your readers.

10. Homemaking

Giving your online conversations a home base

Visiting someone else's place is great. You eat their food, drink their imbibables, and meet their guests. But eventually the urge to host a gathering at your own place takes hold. You want to choose the hors d'oeuvres, cue up the playlist and invite your own friends – in your own home.



It's no different with blogging. True, your organization can go quite a ways in engaging the online world by commenting on third-party blogs. But if you want to be serious about joining the conversation, you'll want a place of your own: an online home for the conversations you want to have.

And while you have no more control over where those conversations ultimately lead and what other conversations may start than you do when you're hosting a party, you're the one who sets the agenda. And it's your voice that sets the tone and pace for your audience.

The conversations here are branded indelibly as yours – for better or for worse. It means you have to be involved, steering the conversation back on track if it heads off-topic or into anti-social territory. But it also means you become known as a place to go, maybe the place to go, to talk about the values and issues that lie at the heart of your brand's values and your organization's mission. Call it thought leadership, public relations or civic participation – those conversations have real value to your organization.

Your blog houses those conversations. And here's how to make the value of that house appreciate:

- **Set the table.** When the first visitors arrive at your blog, they should find a healthy supply of blog posts all ready for them. So when you launch, make sure you have at least five posts already published... and make them your best work.
- **Be involved.** A good host doesn't just set out the crackers and spray-on cheese and then sit back; they interact with their guests, asking how they're doing, making introductions, freshening drinks. Your job is to keep the conversation well-stocked with compelling blog posts and engaging responses to comments.
- **Keep it lively.** Freshen people's virtual drinks with a regular schedule of posting to your blog. There's no law that says

exactly how often you need to post... but if you want to be part of the conversation, the more recent your last contribution, the better.

- **Aggregate.** If you're commenting on behalf of your organization on other blogs, consider using a tool like Disqus or BackType to list those comments on your own blog as well. Other tools will let you include everything from your latest Twitter contributions and your most recent Flickr photographs to your Facebook status updates, Digg submissions and YouTube videos. Including this content gives users a window on your broader online presence, and increases the impact of your off-site activities.

- **Join conversations on related blogs.** A comment on another blog with a link back to your own site drives traffic, but more to the point, it encourages participants to read and engage with your blog. (Of course, your interventions on those other blogs shouldn't be spam-like "come read my blog post!" comments; add real value to the conversation. As a rule, the link to your own site should come in a distant second in prominence to your contribution to that blog's dialogue.)

- **Consider joining a blog aggregator.** For pretty much any topic, there's at least one popular site that aggregates related blog posts, offering one-stop reading (and often rating, ranking and featuring) of posts from dozens or even hundreds of blogs. Those sites can give you a big boost in visibility, and bring even more people to your party... as well as exposing you to the writers of other blogs, and vice versa.

- **Make it easy to find your blog.** People can't come to your party if they can't find your home. Link prominently to your blog from your organization's primary web presence, if possible in the main navigation, and where appropriate from other web sites (e.g. a Facebook page) as well. Make sure your blog's URL is simple and easy to remember – *organizationname.org/blog* or *blog.organizationname.org* – rather than some alphanumeric soup, like *organizationname.org/pages/n/public/content.asp?category=300475629&page=461394&type=581&whatthehellwasthedevelopersmoking=420*.

- **Promote your blog.** What's a party without invitations? Drop bloggers in your field a note to let them know about your blog, and invite them to give their feedback. Talk up your blog at real-world events; add a link in your email subject line. Consider making a modest investment in online ads like Google AdWords and see how that works for you. Do what you can to let potential readers know about your blog, and why they'll find it interesting.

You'll know you're building equity in your online home when:

- You develop a cadre of regulars: positive contributors who comment regularly on your blog, link to you from theirs, and add to the conversation.

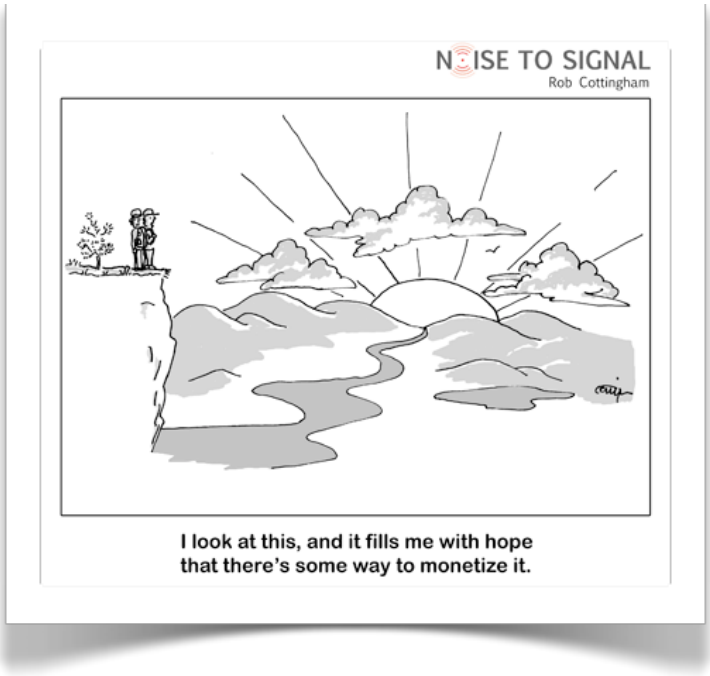
- You and your colleagues start finding useful information by searching your own blog archives.

- Your blog becomes a significant source of traffic to your organization's primary web presence, and not just the other way around.

- Your organization recognizes your blog as an effective way to spark and respond to online conversations about subjects that matter to your organization.

Conclusion

It's easy to let your passion for social media and your awe at its enormous potential get the better of you. And it's just as easy to lose patience with a manager who wants you to spell out exactly what value they can expect for their tiny social media investment, as you watch them spend huge budgets on traditional advertising with a lot less attention to detail. But take a breath... and look at it from their perspective.



They're accountable for the money they spend. If you want them to spend it on a completely new field, one that doesn't have a proven track record and a stack of anecdotal evidence to reassure skittish executives, be prepared to back up your request.

As you're planning your blog, look for every opportunity to yield value – ideally, a tangible, measurable return on investment.

Think too about how you're going to be measuring that return: positive mentions on other blogs, on Twitter, in the mainstream media? Comments and participation on your own blog? Traffic referrals to the rest of your organization's site from the blog? Increases in your organization's followers on sites like Facebook? (Measurement is a whole other topic, but a solid starting point is Katie Paine's book *Measuring Public Relationships*.)

And don't fall into the trap of thinking that value is a bean-counter's concept. **Value means you've done something worthwhile for your organization** – and that their scarce resources have earned at least some return.

Sometimes that return comes in the form of new relationships, greater brand recognition, a shift in positive perceptions, or even more sales or donations. Other times that return may just come in the skills and insights you and your team have gained.

Whatever the value that comes from your blog, you need to be able to recognize it and report it... not just so you can sell your proposal internally, but so you can be sure you're doing something worthwhile for your organization.

The challenge in social media, as an emerging field, is to keep your eye relentlessly on value while giving yourself permission to experiment, to try something unproven, and – frequently – to fail. (Even then, if you've prepared properly, your learnings will provide value that helps to compensate for a misadventure.)

Ultimately, this is about using blogs with intention, and with a view to achieving something worthwhile. And if you succeed – as you very likely will, if you pay close attention to value – then your project will be worthwhile not only to your organization, but to your audience as well.

Good luck!

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