

Blogging for Business -Transcript

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Intro: Enterprise Ireland is the Irish government agency responsible for the development and promotion of the indigenous business sector.

Ralph: Hi, my name is Ralph Averbuch and you're listening to Enterprise Ireland eBusiness unit podcast series. Today we're going to discuss blogging or more specifically we're going to look at the pros and cons of business blogging. Both have potential to enhance your company's profile but also the pitfalls that you may encounter if you don't do your homework first.

With me to discuss this topic I have Damien Mulley. Damien will be known to some for his blogging but he also runs a Cork based consultancy specialising in communications training and has been a regular contributor to a number of websites. Welcome Damien.

Damien: Thank you.

Ralph: And we also have the marketing and communications manager for the Irish Internet Association with us, Roseanne Smith. Roseanne's also a blogger actively participating in the IIA's social media working group and blogs in both business and personal capacities, so welcome to you Roseanne.

Roseanne: Thank you.

Ralph: So, business blogging. Let's start with the whole issue of what we mean by a blog. When you see people talking about, yeah I saw somebody's blog in the media... in traditional media. What are they actually talking about from the perspective of a small business man who has got a website, what does blogging mean to him? What relevance does it have?

Roseanne: Well I think it can mean basically anything you like within certain parameters. A blog is a shortened version of the word weblog, but you rarely see that being used



now days. And basically it's like a diary and it's presented in reverse chronological order so you have the newest post to the blog first and basically it can be literally, like a diary where it says, I did this today, I did that today, I did this the other today. A very personal blog might come across that way.

But generally when it comes to business blogging it might be more talking about and maybe your own products or complementary products that other companies are making available. But again in a chronological sort of way, so it might talk about developments in a particular product or service if you like.

So, but it might also talk about the community that exist around that product or service or about people you meet that may have an affect one way or the other on that product or service. Or other companies who are getting involved partners, collaborators, etc.

Ralph: What makes that different from simply having a website and posting information onto the front of your website saying, this is my company, this is what I'm doing, and...

Roseanne: Well, not necessarily anything. In fact, some websites use blogging software to populate their home page and which is entirely possible. However, blogging is not necessarily just to do with the software behind it. It can also do with the style or format in which the content is presented.

And often blogs tend to be a little more conversational in their tone. Because, one of the key factors in blogging is the ability to use them as a starting point for a conversation to engage with your readers. Because, usually blogs, and good blogs, tend to allow readers to comment on what you have written.

Ralph: Mmmhm.

Roseanne: And therefore start a conversation. So, imagine if you go back to my starting point that you might be writing about your products or services. If you write about your products in a particular way and you're calm and prepared to have comments from your readers, maybe agreeing with you or in some cases

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disagreeing with you about your product or about the product or service that you're offering.

Ralph: Mmm, so I guess one of the key differences that a blog brings to any website is it moves from being, I guess, a monologue to more of a dialogue... it's not just you saying here's what I did today, it's you know, here's the product I've been using and here's an interesting observation I make about that.

And people then have the opportunity to enter into a conversation with about those things. Would you say that's one of the key values that a blogging approach brings potentially.

Damien: Yeah, I'd agree with what Roseanne was saying. It's the conversational way of communicating, that it moves from a company communicating at or even broadcasting at customers... potential customers to a person in a company communicating with a person that happens to be a client or a person that could be a potential client.

So, it's lowering that or it's removing that very kind of stuffy barrier that you normally have and that's people communicating with people, which is what happened in day one when communications first started when were like you know, using sticks and stones and various things like that.

And it's... and when that happens, I think, business becomes better and it's better for companies to communicate in a manner that their customers and their potential customers will understand more and will appreciate more.

And it's blogging while there is the technical part behind it, there's also the philosophical part behind it were it's a new way of changing the way your whole company communicates. And via the website or via other interactions as a result of having a blog on the website. So, I think it's a new way of doing business, which came I guess from the personal first and then it became the business and the commercial after that.

Ralph: Yeah, I guess it would be fair to say that most SME's who've done any kind of active marketing well perhaps, have done something in traditional media. They



may have had an ad that's in the newspaper, they might have done some local radio advertising possibly, and who knows, they might have even put a banner up on our website.

But this is a bit of a departure from what we might understand as the, you know, the traditional marketing tools that you might have were you... you may have an intermediate marketing expert in inverted commas who brings in their knowledge to help you reach your customers.

Here is much... I'm guessing a much more intimate relationship that you're trying to establish with the audience. So that you're not being intermediated by all these different media, you're now having a direct conversation.

Roseanne: Yeah, and I think so. I think part of the reason or the motivation behind that is the idea that nobody knows your company better than you, you know, or your staff. You know, people who are there everyday who are involved in the ups and downs and the ins and outs of the company. So, that who better to write about maybe a new product or service that you've released or about an event that you're presenting out or how to stand out or whatever and all the great people that you meet there.

And I often find that when I do go to events and I do write about them on the IIA blog for example, people will comment then and say yes it was great to meet you and then it'll spread into the other social media. They'll add me on linkedin, they follow me on Twitter, you know, so often the blog doesn't exist in its own right, and it is effected by what exists on your website and it's all part and parcel of the whole thing and the phone calls you make and the people you meet at events. It's part of the real world.

Where as taking out a banner ad or putting an ad in the local newspaper, on a local radio station, they all have their pros as well. But, you have much more control with a blog, in fact you can post something and then edit it if you want to change and you can include that edit, you know, to reflect maybe how something has changed as a result of that post.

So, there's a lot more possibilities to take control of the media if you like as a business blogger. And you can control the message therefore that you're putting out to your customers and your stakeholders in general.

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- Ralph: But, is it about trying to control a message, because I guess in traditional media terms, you put a message and people can't comment on it. They just consume it don't they? Where as... at least with a blog... presumably if you're allowing you're customers, your potential customers to respond.
- Roseanne: Maybe controlled is the wrong word, maybe more be part of the conversation is a better way to describe it, to be engaged, to be involved, to be aware, and as we've been saying in the social media working group kind of since we started is, blogging is going on about your business whether you like it or not, and the most important thing is to be part of the conversation.
- So, the worst thing to happen is to be unaware that people are discussing your product or service and to have no point of kind of come back or of discussion with them and to not engage in that conversation. So, I suppose if you find that people are talking about your product or service, talk back to them, engage with them, see if you can help them, see if you can... if it's a negative conversation, you know, the best thing to do is ask them how you can help to improve the situation.
- Ralph: And one of the key ways to do that through your web presence will be by the implementation of some sort of blog engine that you're able to directly control yourself, either yourself or through, you know, somebody who is nominated to do it in your organization... whether it might be potentially I guess be outsourced, I don't know if that's necessarily a good thing, but we might talk about that a bit later.
- But, taking a step back, how difficult is it for a one man band or a small company who've already got themselves onto the web, they're seeing they're beginning to get some level of interest on what's going on and if they want to implement a strategy that includes, having a blog. What's involved in setting something like that up? Is that something you can pick up on Damien?
- Damien: Yeah, I guess there's a few things that you need to do. I mean you definitely need to pre-plan this. You just can't decide to tell your web guy in the morning that you want a blog and off you go. And then tell somebody in your PR department to do it or if you are a one man band, you have to do it all yourself.



I guess the best thing is to just observe first. Go off and find a few blogs that you actually like, and it doesn't matter whether they're business blogs or sports blogs, just see how they interact with people that read them and see how they respond to comments and see the flow and the flow on a blog is quite different to the flow in the press release or in a newspaper article which is very stodgy and all the personality and humanity is almost rubbed out of these things, where as on a blog it's the other way around, there's a lot of humanity there, which is... at the end of the day it's a lot of truth and with marketing PR, that kind of gets rubbed away to just get a very specific message out and nothing else. Whereas you're being very honest and transparent on your blog.

But, if you just start reading any blogs, maybe seven or eight, it doesn't matter again what they are and see how things work. And then start leaving comments eventually. Once you kind of get a feel for that, maybe start off your own blog and even have it in private first and do some drafts and get feedback from other bloggers and see how they react to it, and they might actually give you some guidance.

And bloggers are fantastic for giving feedback, I mean, they give feedback constantly in comments anyway and they actually appreciate that you're asking for their opinion. And they give you some quite honest feedback and you can alter the way you put your message out after that.

Ralph: What about the indirect benefits that might potentially come out of introducing a business blog to your website. I'm not sure how relevant it would necessarily be to being able to go ahead and justify doing a blog, but for instance; is it a good idea to have a blog, because it gets you better positioning in the search engine for example. Is that a reason to do a blog or is that maybe partially one of the reasons or is it because it is low cost, it doesn't cost you a lot to set up. The barrier to setting up a blog I guess is quite low and be it the cost and maintaining it other than the time resource are fairly limited as well. Are these the key motivators behind why a business should be getting on the blogging bandwagon?

Damien: I guess when it comes to search engines and getting a better ranking because of your blog. For the numerous people in a company and I guess to prove quite quickly how effective the blog is in terms of just numbers alone, that the SEO works quite well and you can your whole website will rise as a result of the blog and you blogging.

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But, that's maybe the most shallow of the benefits whereas the biggest benefit is that your name is going to get around the place, you're going to be seen in your industry, or your niche as that expert or at least a place in your industry to go to get news of other things that are happening or to get opinion, or to see what's happening right now and not waiting for a newsletter or anything like that. I think that's one of the biggest benefits.

And again it's just, it's a soapbox really on the internet for you to show off that you are confident that you know what you're talking about and the benefit of that and the result of that will probably take months to actually build up to whereas SEO, you can see the results within a few weeks. So, it's a kind of a quick fix - is the SEO bit, but being seen as an expert in your industry takes a bit longer, but that's the biggest benefit in my view.

Roseanne: I think though, and it is something that the social media working group in the IIA have been discussing, about how do you measure success as quite as your return investment and it is something that we've really grappled with. We did a survey of Irish business bloggers recently to kind of get an idea of how they actually measured success.

And while Google ranking did figure to certain extent, the big key factor for them is positive feedback from customers. You know, whether that be customers ringing up and saying, oh I just read about this offer on your blog or whether it was in the comments for example or emails or whatever different ways that got this positive feedback.

And also another factor for them was positive comment in other medium. We've seen, you know, myself and Damien I suppose we are paying attention to this more than others, but we've seen how being talked about on blogs has resulted in some prominent bloggers being picked up in the traditional media and being written about in various types of forums and features or in news and so on.

So, you know, that is... it is a fact. It means that if a journalist is doing an article about a specific thing and they do a search and your blog comes up, they would approach you and ask you about this specific, if they read on and discover that you're... seem to know your stuff when it comes to X,Y, or Z whatever it is you're selling. And I think to approach blogging with the motivation that it's



going to improve your search and your ranking in Google or different search engines, is to invite failure actually.

I think you will find that it's not going to be enough motivation, you won't get the kind of comments or feedback from your readers that you would hope possibly, you know, it's unlikely. Whereas if you blog from, it sounds a bit cheesy, but blog from the heart or from the mind or from your experience. It's like what our teachers told us when we were kids, write from your own experience, and there's lots of ways to get inspiration for blogging as well.

As Damien mentioned, read other blogs, see what other bloggers are writing about, think about what kind of similar things could you write about, say if you have a flower shop and somebody else has a wine shop and they're writing about the new wines they're bringing in, think about, you could write every season, you could write a different blog about all the lovely flowers that are coming into your shop, for example, this is a simple example.

There's also you know, I suppose not to get too technical about it, but one of the big things that drives in social media, one of the aspects are feeds, RSS feeds Really Simple Syndication feeds and it's really easy to follow what other people are saying on blogs through setting up a feed reader, those are various types available online and they're free.

And that's a great thing about a lot of this technology, is, it's very cost effective and sometimes even free. Like you can set up a blog for free tomorrow, run it in private as Damien said and seek feedback from other people to help you kind of get going on it. And this, without a penny spent except your time.

Ralph: So a lot of the technologies that some of us may have seen, I mean you can look at various blogs. A lot of those things are a constituent part of the software that you would use presumably. So if you start a blog, do they generally always have an RSS feed that comes with it?

Damien: Almost, I would say about 99% of blogging software out there now has a feed built in. So while there isn't any standardised system, there is I guess just a standard that's there in the background, where if you get blogging software it's going to have a feed, but as well as that, it's going to give you the option to have plug-ins so you can change the look and the feel of the blog and there's themes that you can download again, they're free.

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So, there's a huge resource out there. Again the best thing to do is to look at some of the blogs that you like and ask those bloggers how they did that or how they're able to have comments displayed on the side of their blog, whereas some other blogs don't. And they'll pass on the information, and again as Roseanne said, the vast majority of this stuff is free and even the support of it is free.

And just there are platforms that you pay money for the likes of Moveable Type is one of them. But, the biggest cost factor in all of this is the time of somebody. Both research in advance and then a continuous, I guess, updating of blog posts over 6 months or 12 months.

Ralph: But, why for instance would RSS be an important part of a blog? What does it do over and above having your posting that are, you know, in chronological order.

Damien: It takes the idea of bookmarks and turns them around so that if you add something to your newsreader, your RSS feed reader. When the website updates that you subscribe to, it gets sent to you. So, you don't have to log on in the morning and go to 20 or 30 different websites and see if there's anything new and then... a lot of times what happens is people forget to go to a website and check up on a website after a while and they just completely forget about it. So, they're not visiting your site anymore.

Ralph: So, it's equivalent to me and my mobile phone getting the RTE headlines on my mobile through that... that's the same thing as a RSS feed.

Damien: That's it.

Roseanne: Absolutely yeah.

Ralph: Okay.



Roseanne: Or I suppose it's like email in a way and actually some people make sort of posts or blog updates by email and that's using RSS basically, you can automatically create an email and it sends it to your subscribers. So, it's a great way of developing a subscribers list as well.

Ralph: What about the issues, I guess that need to be considered before you dive in? Because, you were saying you could do things within a closed group, you can get comfortable with the software, you can look at other blogs to see how they are doing it and how they're making it an effective part of their overall marketing approach I suppose. For instance, if you're just going in to give a go and you don't have any clear objective, it's about, having realistic expectations as to what it can do for you... have we seen examples where it's transformed the business or is it more a case of its adding depth to what you already do as a business?

Damien: There's a few sites out there... I knew of a website called curious wines and they're based in Bandon (<http://www.curiouswines.ie>). And they launched their website recently enough and it came straight away with a blog and their blog is updated every second or every third day with special offers and discussions about wine.

And at times they have the bluffers going to wine, so if you don't really understand wine it's... the guys behind it, there's two brothers there, the Kane Brothers, they explain it all. And their blog is driving traffic as well and they had a plan in advance, they knew what they were looking for, they had blog posts written in advanced, they had topics decided upon and they looked around for a good while as far as I know, checking out other blogs to see how they worked.

And again, it was a study thing, so you can dive right in if you want to. The trouble is, is if you're a business, you might get stuck with other things if you haven't planned for time and if you haven't planned post in advanced. And sometimes companies get a completely wrong, hand it out to an outside PR firm or get their own PR people to do it.

And then all you get is copy and pasted press releases into blog posts. And instead of just turning people off, it will actually create a negative sentiment towards that, you know, big launch where you've got a new blog, we're fantastic,

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we're hip, we're cool, we're with the kids and then it almost insults those people that go to the website, go through a blog and all they get is just crap content.

So, you need to be very careful, especially when you're a business and start it off if you want to just dive in, just even start with a personal blog and just start playing around there, and then once you get a feel for it that way, bring it into the business. The same way everything else has come into business over the past few years.

Blogs have come in from a personal capacity. Even the personal computer came in from a personal capacity, email, video, everything else like that. So, play around if you want with a personal blog and then become a bit more formalised when you do bring it into the business and realise that you're not just doing your blog for fun, whether it is fun. You're doing it for a business reason as well.

Ralph: Right, so it's not necessary even that you have to post a blog every single day or every other day. Is frequency an issue there? I suppose if you hardly ever post, you're not going to get much of a following there, I'd imagine.

Roseanne: Actually I read recently about a slow blogging movement, which I was kind of interested in. But, the idea that there is something to be said and you can get involved in the slow blogging movement if you... I don't know if it's a movement, but I suppose the idea there behind it is that you blog maybe once a month or once a quarter, but you don't post in little snippets, you're posting a well thought out sort of essay on a very particular topic.

So it's a very specific type of blogging and I suppose you could put in the bracket of thought leadership if you'd like. Or else you can post and more regularly at varying lengths on different issues, like the IIA blog that I write on in a professional capacity, I would post maybe snips that the members bring to my attention or I often encourage the members to use it as a platform as guest bloggers. And they will write about specific issues to do with using the internet as a business tool, which is what the IIA is all about.

Which is a great help, because it gives me a couple of days off, but it's also great for them because they look at interest in their business or what it is specifically



they do or and they have more expertise about specific issues than I have, that I would know nothing about, but obviously their companies it knows more about it.

So, that's another way to approach it is that if you do read a blog that you like and it's about an area that you know a bit about and maybe see a gap in knowledge or something. Approach them and offer them to write a guest post, some bloggers wouldn't be interested, but some would be delighted, they'd like that, it might give them a week off or whatever from blogging, so it's well worth considering.

And then don't forget that blogging is not just about typing words, you can use all sorts of media in your blog. A picture can speak a thousand words and obviously be very careful about copyright issues and you can find out a bit more about that by, you know, doing a search and looking out for example, creative commons and finding out about how people copyright their images and stuff like that.

But there are places that you can purchase images for good value. The other thing is, there's loads of content on the likes of YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>), Vimeo (<http://www.vimeo.com>), Blip TV (<http://blip.tv>), where you can find videos about various things often and sometimes quite technical, like Jughead for example; has lots of videos that explain how to do things, so if you're in the business of something technical, you can explain how to do things via video.

One of our members is Worldwide Cycles (<http://www.worldwidecycles.com>) and they're based in Tipperary and Barry Meehan who's the owner of Worldwide Cycles which is a bicycle shop. He spoke at our congress last year and he was really a big hit at the congress in talking about how his blog basically helped him sort of breakthrough with his business.

And one example he gave was, he came home one evening... he's mad about cycling and he blogs about, obviously he blogs about his shop, but he blogs about cycling that he did at the weekend, he blogs about his kids first bicycle, you know, all sorts of things that he cares about and that is obviously cycling related. Because, he's aware that his customers are as bonkers about bikes as he is, so they like to have conversations about bicycles.

But, one example that he gave at congress last year that really sort of kind of nailed it for people was, he came one evening after cycling and the bike was filthy. So, he decided that he would clean it, but he decided that I'm going to video myself cleaning this, because there is a particular way to cleaning a bike.

Now, I cycle everywhere, I tell you, there's no particular way to clean a bike in my house. But in his house there is, so he got out his regular digital video

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camera, I don't even think it was a video camera, I think it was possibly a stills camera with a video aspect to it.

And he proceeded to take apart his bicycle and show a very specific way to do it. And he used a particular product while he was cleaning his bicycle. Now, he didn't go... I think this is great... but he did say, I think at one point in the video that he preferred it to some of the others that he'd tried.

Sales of that product doubled in the next week. He put the video on YouTube, he copied the code, let YouTube make the code for you, he pasted into a blog post and said, thought this might be helpful if you thinking about cleaning your bike during this winter time, they get very mucky, very personal. And sales of that product doubled the following week.

Ralph: So his now a thought leader on bicycle cleaning?

Roseanne: Well, yes he is, on bicycles in general. I mean if I want to know anything about bicycles I would ask him definitely you know. So that's just one example, so you know, if there's something that you do in your shop or in your place of work on a regular basis and you think that people might be interested to know how you got from A to B, I mean, I've seen pictures of coffee machines in some of our members places of work because they kind of run on coffee so they show a photo of their fancy new coffee machines, stuff like this. So, to me that just makes it easier for me to pick up the phone and talk to them, because I know they're people.

Damien: The real magic happens when people are starting to recommend you being that thought leader as saying, have a look at this website and it's not just the online, it's the offline so, what are connecting a lot of people online are those are probably the hubs in their local networks, their peers.

Once someone asked question about cycles, all these people are going to be recommending Barry Meehan and Worldwide Cycles. And these people wouldn't have ever meet Barry and maybe they're not usually into bikes themselves but they know of a guy that is an expert in bikes and they're recommending that



person just based on the fact that they're out there and they're blogging and they've got a personality behind it.

That's amazing to actually encounter when people... or when you ring you up saying, X so and so recommended you and your services and you don't know the person, but they know you because of the blog .

Ralph: Well right, I've got the difficult question. Is there any kind of business out there that couldn't potentially benefit if they already set themselves up with a web presence and they see the web as part of their overall business strategy. Is there any business out there that you just wouldn't recommend going to the business of blogging?

Damien: I couldn't find an example of an industry or a company that shouldn't blog. I'm going to quote a guy called Russell Davies here who thinks and the future of companies not having blogs is, it isn't wrong for a business, but it's going to be eccentric the same way a company not listing themselves in the yellow pages isn't wrong, but it is eccentric.

Any company can have a blog and can use it, it's just how they use it. It's just another communications tool at the end of the day, so you could use it, but it's how you use it, it most important. If you've got a... again I'll go back to the legal thing, I see issues like this all the time with large corporates where the legal team won't allow anything through whatsoever. And when a company that, starts a blog off, and it's so bland and boring it's actually probably harming the company. So if you're in a company like that, that has a lot of these regulations or if you're in a very regulated market, a blog might be the best way to communicate with people... it is one of the ways of doing so.

Roseanne: That said though, a lot of companies who are or sectors that are very heavily regulated, can use blogs internally, they don't have to be for public consumption and it's a great way to keep your... especially if you've got a disparate staff, who are spread out over regions or whatever.

It's a great way to keep the staff informed about, new ways of selling, new ways of thinking, new ways of... not that I'm saying companies should be telling their staff how to think, but you know, maybe new things that one region has tried it

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out, why don't you try this out, sharing different stats and figures and facts and contacts and stuff like that and do it in a personable way so that more than one person can access that kind of information.

So, it's a great way for a company to share company knowledge. And that's a big, big step as well, because, when those people leave, their thoughts are written down if you know what I mean, because there is turnover and it's important... and it could be important in the times that we're in, let's be honest about it.

Ralph: Well, I just want to say thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us and if you want to find out more information about blogging, you can get some useful links by visiting www.openup.ie, thanks again.

Exit: Enterprise Ireland is the Irish government agency responsible for the development and promotion of the indigenous business sector.

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