



six apart
guide to
business
blogging

ANIL DASH

from the creators of
Movable Type and TypePad

MOVABLE TYPE™


 TypePad



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checklist: getting started

At Six Apart, we've helped more businesses get started with blogging than any other company around. And we're really excited about having the chance to share some of what we've learned about how to get started with business blogging.

What's the most important thing to know? **There are no wrong answers.** Blogging is all about trying things out and making adjustments along the way. And this checklist offers some essential steps to help you get started.

Get comfortable with the basics of blogging

Make sure you understand what a blog is (refer to "What is a Blog?" in this guide) and then try things out for yourself to get comfortable. **You might want to set up a personal test blog** to gain experience. And don't be afraid to click around some public blogs and leave some comments or email the site owners for their tips. Most bloggers love to help new people discover the power of blogs.

Start smart and simply

We've identified a few of the key scenarios that most businesses use blogs for, but in general they can be used anywhere you'd like to improve communications online. A key here is to understand your company's culture and begin with an area that **requires the fewest changes** from current practice.

Begin in a small, well-defined area

Don't bite off more than you can chew. Pick a specific area of focus and **define an achievable goal** (i.e., "increase the number of repeat visitors to our website by updating at least twice a week"; "speak to the enthusiast audience that's most passionate about our brand"; or "link to positive testimonials that we find in the blogosphere").

Set goals for the trial and educate stakeholders

Talk to everyone on your team who'll be contributing to or judging the success of your blogging project. Set expectations about what you'll achieve during your blogging test.

Create a first draft of a blogging policy

As you start experimenting with blogs, you'll likely find a number of concerns about communication, employee policy, and company culture—things that have nothing to do with

technology. **Don't wait until there's a problem!** Anticipate this need, and tell your community you'll be revising the policy based on feedback.

Set up a single point of contact for questions

When questions come up you need to have a single place that **anyone in your organization can go to ask questions**. The majority of your community will never take advantage of it, but having that resource available will avert problems before they arise, decrease the odds of any liability issues arising, and help inform you about any improvements that need to be made.

Identify your technical requirements

Your main technical considerations will be **how well blogging fits into the workflow and processes of your organization**. If you have the support of technical resources such as your IT department, consider an installable software platform such as Movable Type Enterprise Solution, which offers extensive integration with your current applications. If you're doing a smaller project, an unofficial experiment, or can't get the support of your technology team, you can get a blog up and running quickly and inexpensively with a hosted blogging platform such as TypePad Business Class.

Have a "quiet launch" of your blog

Most organizations make small mistakes or have some glitches when they start blogging. Reduce your risk by starting with a low profile blog. Many vendors offer a trial period to get the bugs out—take advantage of it to evaluate the technology and the workflow process for blogging. Let your bloggers and your community know **that the effort is a work in progress** and that feedback is welcome.

Make changes based on initial deployment

Now that you're collecting feedback from your community, put it to use. You don't have to do every single thing that bloggers ask for, but if you **make a few changes** and explain how they were driven by the blogging community, you'll earn both respect for and trust in your effort. And don't forget to update your blogging policy if you need.

Use community feedback

Your audience will tell you when they're ready for your blogging platform to evolve: Additional feedback options, new blogs aimed at particular communities, even simple improvements to the design or visual appearance of your blog—any of these changes can **help people feel invested** in your success in blogging.



Identify successes

The benefits that blogging can provide are sometimes in unexpected areas. **Reach out to others** in your organization with different areas of expertise to help measure your achievements. Brainstorm ways in which these improvements could apply to other areas of your business.

Push for broad deployment based on achieved business objectives

Now that you have some real benefits to talk about, it's time to formalize your blogging effort. Find out how to scale up both the technology and the workflow you've implemented for your current blogs. Pick enthusiastic advocates within different divisions or workgroups to help be your ambassadors within the organization. Give them this checklist, (with your own lessons and tactics that have been effective). Most people who become blogging advocates are passionate about both the technology and its results, but it's important to **present the benefits of blogging in business terms** instead of personal ones. If you need help, we've created a blogging advocate's guide with great pointers and tips.



the basics

An introduction to blogging

WHAT'S A BLOG?

Technically speaking, “blog” is short for “weblog,” and it describes a website that’s frequently and easily updated, with posts, photographs, sound clips, graphics and more. A blog shows readers what the author has to say or to sell, whether it’s a photographer displaying his shots or a company selling its products. The most recent information is shown first, plus community feedback. But a better definition of blogging is about what the technology makes possible:

Blogs are a safe, easy way to share information with your audience, and to create an ongoing relationship with them.

There are millions of blogs in the world, ranging from personal journals used to communicate with friends and family, to the large number of business blogs used to help improve communications within an organization and externally with their customers’. Because blogging was traditionally about personal expression, blogs are usually associated with having a more “human” or personal voice than the sometimes impersonal tone found on corporate websites.

So what’s the basic terminology you’ll need to know? Updating or maintaining a blog is called “blogging,” and it has become one of the most popular ways to interact on the internet. Blogs can be used to share words, text, photos, movies, audio files, and anything else that helps people communicate with each other. And blogs can be delivered to an audience wherever they are, whether at a computer, a mobile phone, or a mobile device like an iPod. (If you’ve heard of “podcasting,” this is how it works—you’re delivering a media automatically.)

WHY WOULD A BUSINESS WANT A BLOG?

By far, one of most common questions from business people is, “Why do I need a blog?” For businesses and professionals, there are a few key reasons why you should start a blog. **Blogs make it easy to communicate more effectively with the audience you care about and build a relationship.** It’s the easiest way to update a website, provide simple and effective ways of automatically organizing the content you create, and notify your audience when your site has been updated. And blogs also allow you to collect feedback from that audience, either right on your own website or via traditional means such as email.

Blogs are often used by marketers or media companies to increase the number of visitors to a website, and inspire those visitors to return more frequently. Having a blog can also make your site more attractive to search engines, which means it’s more likely your site will show up in

the results when people search for your products or services. Think of how often you find a useful product or service by typing a few words into Google or some other search engine: With a blog, your company can show up in those results, too.

Having a public blog can also inspire positive reactions from your customers or audience. A public blog makes your company seem more approachable and those traits will serve you well if you need to engage in a dialogue with your customers or community. You can use a blog to improve community relations or as an important part of a crisis management plan. By letting readers know that *real people* work at your business, you get a few simple benefits:

- Potential customers will like your company better, because they'll feel like they "know" someone who works there.
- Your audience will be introduced to new products or services and can easily provide feedback on them.
- Customers will be more forgiving of mistakes or glitches, because it's easier to see that real people make mistakes.

Public blogs are a *great* complement to the communications technologies you already use, such as email newsletters, conference calls, or mailings. And the messages you send using a blog can be automatically delivered to your audience wherever they are: On their browser's start page, in their email inbox, to their mobile phone, or on any other mobile device.

Many companies also create *private* weblogs for use within an organization, to simplify tasks like project tracking, workgroup collaboration, or process management. Inside your company, blogs take a place alongside knowledge management tools, portal applications, and email.

HOW DO I GET A BLOG?

Blogging is an inexpensive, simple technology, making it easy to get started. There are two types of services to get you started:

- Installable blogging software
- Hosted blogging services

So what's the difference? Installable software such as Movable Type is maintained on a web server you control and offers the most options for customization and integration. Installing software on your own server is the best option if you're interested in keeping private blogs on an intranet or network, and have a team that is comfortable with some technical requirements.

With a hosted solution such as TypePad, you sign up with a service to get started and the service takes care of the operations for you. This requires the least amount of management



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effort, and is the best option if you want to get a public-facing blog up and running quickly. A hosted service is a great choice if you don't have easy access to an IT or IS department, or don't want to involve a technical team in your deployment.

Most organizations that deploy blogs start by selecting a technology platform (see "Evaluating blogging platforms") and then choose an advocate for the blogging effort. To get started, you can experiment with low-cost or free services that let you try out the technology without incurring a lot of risk or obligation.

WHY WOULD I WANT MORE THAN ONE BLOG?

Most organizations that deploy blogs end up creating and managing more than one, either for use in their organization or to reach different audiences and customer groups. Separate blogs make it easy for:

- Each workgroup to share updates with the whole company
- Each of your products to display features, tips and tricks, or promotional offers
- Each project team to talk about milestones or progress
- Executive leaders to communicate about goals
- Each employee to be heard, especially in an information-focused or services company

Basically, **blogs are like email** for each project or group. The difference is, people who aren't members of that group can discover the information on the blog. It's also easier to search and retrieve archived material in a blog than it is to get messages that are locked away in an inbox. Once your team gets in the habit of putting information on a blog, you don't need to worry about whether or not you're subscribed to the correct email list. It's all right there.

If you're using blogs as a communication or promotional tool to the public, it makes sense to have **one blog for each of the audiences you're talking to**. General Motors' Movable Type-powered GM Blogs site does a great job with this on its two flagship blogs. The sites differ in approach but share a sensibility, from Fastlane (<http://fastlane.gmblogs.com>), a blog about car models and designs, to FYI Blog (<http://fyi.gmblogs.com>), a general-interest blog about company news.

What these blogs have in common is a tight focus on a single audience and a sense of purpose that's reflected in a single-topic blog. Whether it's inside your company or to the world at large, it makes sense to have **one blog per conversation**. A single blog for each communication channel is easy since blogging tools let you keep track of all those conversations easily.

For the readers of your blogs, it's easy to discover the content they're looking for, since blog posts can automatically be organized into archives.

Facts and figures

Let's face it—sometimes you just need some numbers to convince others that blogs are the way to go. We've put together some statistics that can help you make the case for blogs, gathered from independent research that's been published over the past few years.

- 6 million Americans get their news and information from RSS aggregators
- 59% of CEOs say they find blogs useful for internal communications
Source: PRWeek and Burson-Marsteller, 2005; Pew Internet & American Life Project 2005
- 47% of CEOs find blogs useful for external communications
- 11% of the US population as a whole read blogs
Source: JupiterResearch consumer survey, June 2005
- 83% of corporate bloggers saw a traffic increase to their site
- 51% took less than 1-2 months from initial concept to launch of blog
- 88% saw a boost in search engine ranking within 3 months of launch
- 62% saw an increase in sales within 3 months of launch
Source: Backbone Media Business Blogging Survey, 2005
- 50 million U.S. Internet users visited blog sites in the first quarter of 2005. That's roughly 30% of all U.S. Internet users and 1 in 6 of the total U.S. population
- Compared to the average Internet user, blog readers are significantly more likely to live in wealthier households, be younger and connect to the Web on high-speed connections
- Blog readers also visit nearly twice as many web pages as the Internet average, and they are much more likely to shop online
Source: comScore Media Metrix, August 2005
- 57% of bloggers are male, 43% are female
- 48% of bloggers are age 30 or under; 52% are over 30
- 70% of bloggers have broadband/high-speed Internet access at home
- 82% of bloggers have been Internet users for six or more years
- 42% of bloggers live in households earning more than \$50,000 a year
- 39% of bloggers have college or graduate degrees
Source: Intelliseek + Edelman, Spring 2005
- Blog readership is growing among all demographics
- Blog readership jumped 58% in 2004



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- 27% of Internet users read blogs daily in November 2004

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project

Blogs vs. other communication tools

One of the most common areas of confusion about blogs is in understanding how they're different from the other technology you might already be using. Here are some facts that may help you differentiate the areas on your website.

SEND UPDATE NOTIFICATIONS

Blogging tools let your audience be automatically updated via email or XML feeds whenever you've updated your website. Most sites require people to remember to visit, and then figure out what's been updated since their last visit, but blogs **reduce the amount of effort required** to keep the site up-to-date. More importantly, these automatic updates keep your audience coming back again and again.

PUBLISH XML FEEDS (AKA RSS FEEDS)

XML or RSS feeds **reach your audience, wherever they are**, with whatever information you choose to share. . Feeds can be read or displayed on mobile devices like iPods, PDAs or phones; on an increasing number of consumer electronics devices such as Tivo; and an automatically be delivered to desktop and laptop computers, either in the web browser or on other websites. For more information, see "About feeds."

YOUR OWN ONLINE SPACE

Blogs are a space online that you "own." It means **your company sets the tone of the conversation** and behavior. One simple way to think about this is to compare the difference between how people act on the sidewalk in front of an office building as opposed to the lobby inside the building. The lobby is an "owned" space, so disruptive behavior (or simply unwanted salespeople!) can be stopped and prevented from participating in the conversation. In the same way, blogs can make sure a conversation online is productive and stays on topic.

FEEDBACK THROUGH COMMENTS AND LINKS

With a blog, **you get comments and feedback from your audience** that can be published on your site, collected through email, or displayed using a system called TrackBack (see "About TrackBack") that shows when another blogger has linked to your site. Your audience is happy because they can engage and respond, and you're happy because you're collecting valuable feedback without painful or expensive surveys or polls.

Comparisons to other online community tools

BLOGS VS. REGULAR WEBSITES

Blogs are more dynamic than traditional websites, and are more likely to have a human voice. That means readers form a tighter connection with the blog and the company that publishes it. Blogging promises an ongoing relationship, without requiring a lot of financial investment or obligation on your part. A static website doesn't always indicate that there are real people on the other end who care about customers and their needs.

BLOGS VS. EMAIL

Email is a fantastic tool for updating customers or members of your team, but these days most people feel frustrated that their inbox is just another burden to deal with. And problems with junk or spam email make delivery unreliable at best. Blogs complement email by being more permanent and reliable, less demanding or intrusive for readers, and able to reach a wider audience.

For marketers, using blogs to share a message eliminates concerns about opt-in and privacy. Subscribing to blogs or XML feeds automatically verifies a reader's interest in the content, and makes it easy to send new messages without having to learn new technology or tools.

In any organization, blogs can be updated by email, making it easy to build blogs into your existing email workflow. And you can send out blog content by email to people who are used to getting information in their inbox and don't want to learn anything new.

BLOGS VS. TRADITIONAL CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS (CMS)

Though CMS vendors describe advanced workflow capabilities or permissions as benefits of the system, most regular users see those "features" as a pain, and they avoid them like the plague.

Worse, to deploy a CMS, you often have to have your people trained, and if the IT or IS department sends them away for a day of training, they'll come back *still* being unwilling to use the system, only now they'll be resentful for having their time wasted.

On the other hand, blogs are easy (and fun) enough to use that people do lots of blogging in their free time. Besides being much simpler for non-technical people to use, blogs offer most of the benefits of more expensive traditional content management systems:

- You can easily output your content through templates in multiple formats.
- The system manages archiving, organization, categorization, and publishing automatically.
- You can set permissions over who can create or edit content.
- Blogs can integrate with your existing website and other applications.

And with blogging, you can take advantage of the expertise your team already has, allowing you to leverage their experience. Blogging tools tend to be more flexible than older content management systems, making it easy for even those who are not technically savvy to change the content and design of your published pages.

BLOGS VS. FORUMS OR BULLETIN BOARDS

Forums and bulletin boards have traditionally been extremely difficult to navigate, and often allow almost *anyone* to start a conversation. As a result, the burden of managing these communities is pretty high; you end up either playing forum police, always on the lookout for bad behavior, or your forum becomes a haven for those who have a lot of time on their hands.

With a blog, **your company is in charge** and controls the conversation in a way that forums just don't allow. Instead of anyone being able to create their own thread or conversation, you can limit posting to authorize staff. You also don't have to worry about content appearing on your site without your approval—it's easy to set comments on your blog to only be published *after* you've approved them. So there's no scramble to go back and clean up a conversation that's gone off the rails and polluted your website.

BLOGS VS. WIKIS

Wikis are a part of a newer breed of tools designed to allow anyone in an organization to collaboratively edit or revise documents stored in a central repository. Many organizations find **wikis are a good complement to blogs**. To date, business use of wikis have been limited, because most of the tools are simply too hard for everyday people to use. As with most technology, though, it's getting easier as more people figure wikis out, and the ease of creating documents with a wiki makes the tool a good match for the simple publishing of blogs.

The biggest distinction between blogs and wikis is that wikis are designed to create a single collaborative result, the sum total of the efforts of everyone who can view that web page. Perhaps the most famous example of this is *Wikipedia*, which is trying to use everyone on the Internet to create the most comprehensive encyclopedia ever made. But sometimes you want to share some information and be the *owner* of that information. Blogs are perfect for these situations: They only allow people to respond or react to the information you've shared, but they can't modify it themselves.

If you're considering a wiki, you'll want to pair it with a blog to get the most out of it. Use the blog to post information about updates on the wiki or to collect comments from your community about content on the wiki.



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BLOGS VS. CHAT

Chat systems such as instant messenger applications have exploded in popularity in recent years. They share some common traits with blogs, including immediacy and simplicity of use. But most instant messenger chats tend to disappear as soon as they end, making it impossible to archive, search, or recall a conversation without buying additional expensive software.

Fortunately, it's possible to connect chat and blogs, and to use a chat interface to create or suggest new content for a blog. That way, your blog can collect and store the best information that your team is sharing through chat systems right now.

The benefits of blogging for media companies

Many of the first organizations to adopt blogs have been in the media industry, because the media business is always looking for faster and more effective ways to share information and entertainment with their audiences.

From the largest media organizations in the world to global television networks to hometown newspapers and independent publishers, blogging is an easy way to extend your reach. Even better, readership of blogs has been steadily increasing, so average readers have become familiar with the medium.

Blogs also make it easier for people to find your content once they've visited your blog, since a blog automatically organizes your information, publishes it via XML (RSS) feeds, and makes it easier to discover through search engines. Best of all, blogs are ideal for reaching audiences that are tough to connect with in other channels. People listening to iPods, folks using laptops, or TiVo fans are all groups that get more and more of their information through blogs.

We've outlined a few of the key benefits of blogging that media companies have seen, based on real-world blogs that are in use today.

Low-cost web authoring

Publishing to a blog doesn't require an expensive content management system, so you can get started without involving your web team or IT department or enduring a lengthy training process. And posting current content on a blog is simpler and faster than putting it on a website. Independent research says that blogs can let you reduce the costs of web publishing by 90%. (*Source: SKK.*)

The fastest way to publish

Publishing to a blog is fast and the results are immediate—vital when you have to get a story or news item online as quickly as possible. You can define as little or as much workflow as you

need and your creative people can get the word out without being stymied by software. You also don't have to choose between posting to a blog or your traditional content management system—blogs can integrate with your existing systems and complement the processes you already have in place.

Publish from anywhere

If you need to let your writers post stories to your website from the road, from their portable computers or from any other mobile device, blogs allow for this mobility. You can simply email content directly to your blog, or use one of a number of dedicated applications that are available for mobile devices like BlackBerries, Treos, or other PDAs.

Even if you're just working from a laptop computer, blogs can be updated from anywhere you have access to a standard web browser. You don't need to install any software on your computers, and you can even access your blog software from shared or public access Internet terminals.

Increase your reach

Your current audience can get updates more easily, and the people who haven't found your site yet can discover your blog with the standard search engines they're already using. How does it work?

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

Search engines prefer content that's fresh. Because they are frequently updated, **blogs rise fast to the top of search engine rankings** and drive more traffic to your website. In addition, search engines favor sites that are well-structured, heavily linked, and accessible to any kind of reader. Blogs meet these criteria automatically, without you having to change any settings or even think about what the search engines want.

XML FEEDS (RSS)

If you've ever seen a site that says "Add this to My Yahoo" or "Subscribe to our feed," you've seen feeds in action. They **help distribute your content to your readers** by sharing your blog posts in a format that can be subscribed to in a web browser, via email, in a reader's homepage, or in special programs called feed readers. Feeds deliver all the advantages of email newsletters without the hassle of managing a subscriber list, dealing with spam filters, or having to maintain a system for letting readers unsubscribe.

And you don't have to do anything extra to take advantage of feeds. Just like optimizing for search engines, publishing feeds for your blog takes place automatically whenever you update. Using third-party services, you can even place ads in your feeds, reaching your most dedicated

subscribers, and there are also services to let you measure the number of readers for your feeds so you can track their impact.

Lead the conversation

The most important reason to start a blog as a media company is to participate in a conversation with your audience. These days, media is more than just publishing stories and hoping readers like them. It's increasingly about provoking a dialogue and shaping the debate, and the best way to jump in is to lead your audience in a conversation about the topics they care about.

Your audience has a voice, too, and they're expecting to be heard, not just be spoken to. Blogs give you a chance to start that dialogue in a way that's controlled, so you can have the benefits of an open exchange without having to deal with unwanted or unproductive content being published on your site.

The benefits of blogs for small and medium businesses

Blogs are the perfect tool for the smaller business—they're easy to set up, they can open up new channels to talk to your customers, and can improve the performance of your current communication tools. Here's how:

FAST AND INEXPENSIVE PUBLISHING

Blogs let you have a truly dynamic website that encourages people to visit and gives them incentive to return. Updating business websites can be a slow process, requiring the involvement of your IT department. Publishing to a blog is fast, the results are immediate and no IT resources are required

BOOST SEARCH ENGINE RANKINGS

Blogs are favored in search engine listings because they're updated frequently, making blogs one of the few areas where a small company's marketing efforts are often on a level playing field with the biggest companies in the world. Update your blog and your small business can outmaneuver the big guys on that first page of Google results. In fact, 83% of companies that have launched blogs saw both a traffic increase to their website and received more qualified traffic from their blogs. (Source: Backbone Media Business Blogging Survey, 2005.)

INCREASE YOUR REACH

Because blogs are distributed through XML (RSS) feeds, readers can find your information wherever they are and in the places they're already looking, such as their web browser's start page, or on their mobile devices and iPods. And most importantly, you don't have to rely on customers taking the initiative to come to your website to be notified of changes they go to



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them automatically. That means you can reach an audience anywhere in the world, while still keeping your human touch.

HUMANIZE YOUR CORPORATION

One of the key advantages you have in competing with larger companies is that you can offer the perspective of *real people* who know and care about your customers. You also have the advantage of being able to respond to their needs faster, more efficiently, and with more “personality” than will a mega-business.

Businesses talk a lot about the value of having a **real relationship with customers**, and blogs let you deliver on that promise efficiently. And if you’re a small company that wants to seem a little larger, the professional design and cutting-edge features like XML feeds that come automatically with your blog can make you look bigger than you are.

CUSTOMER RESEARCH AND INSIGHT

Blogs can collect valuable and immediate feedback from customers and are an **inexpensive way to conduct ongoing consumer research**. After all, they use your products or services more often than your employees do, and that means they can come up with new ideas or suggest improvements. On a blog, that’s as simple as a customer’s leaving a comment for you to collect and share throughout your company.

CREATE LOYAL CUSTOMERS AND GET GOOD PR

Just think—the first time one of your customers says, “I suggested something to this company, and they *actually listened!*” you’ll have made a customer for life- especially when they compare it to trying to reach a big company by phone.

There’s a huge PR value, too. A lot of times, journalists or other bloggers are looking for an expert to talk about the industry that you do business in. While a global corporation might be busy having their PR team negotiate with their lawyers about what exactly they can say to the press, you can simply be available for contact through your blog and be ready to respond to the press when they are working on a story.

In fact, a Backbone Media survey of hundreds of business bloggers from late 2005 showed that **35% of companies that were blogging got an interview request from a journalist within the first 3 months that their blog was running.**

SHOW, DON’T TELL

Blogs can position **your company as a thought leader**. If you’re an expert in your field, the best way to have customers find out about it is to follow the old adage: “Show, don’t tell.” A blog lets you demonstrate your mastery in an area by example, making your unique

qualifications obvious and reducing the need for the “hard sell” when persuading new customers.

The truth of the matter is, it’s easier to trust a company that hasn’t grown to an inhuman scale. A blog can also help you to reassure customers that your small company has the resources to get the job done right by showing them testimonials from current satisfied customers.

The benefits of blogging for marketers

MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Whether it’s talking to customers, potential customers, or partners, blogs have already become a common part of a company website. The reasons why are simple: Blogs are extremely easy and inexpensive to update, and thus form a complement to, or even an alternate distribution venue for, content that used to be sent as an email newsletter or direct mail piece. The voice of your blog can help **build your brand** and gives you an outlet for messages that are too long, detailed, nuanced, or personal to communicate through other media.

One of the best reasons to use blogs as part of your marketing mix is that it gives you instant credibility with other bloggers. In many industries, the influencers and tastemakers in the community already have blogs; being able to engage them with your own messages is a critical opportunity you’ll want to have available. No less an authority than General Motors’ Vice Chairman (and auto industry legend) Bob Lutz said it best himself in Business Week magazine:

“To blog or not to blog? The answer, simply enough, is to blog. No better opportunity exists to engage in an open dialog and exchange of ideas with customers and potential customers.”

Ways to use blogs in your business

If you’re interested in blogs but aren’t sure of the right way to use them, we’ve outlined some common usages that apply to any size business. (Note: We haven’t covered the use of blogs for professional publishing companies. For information on those topics, see “The benefits of blogging for media companies.”)

MARKETING AND PROMOTION

The combination of immediacy, authenticity, and flexibility makes blogs a natural tool for talking to audiences you care about.

DEMOGRAPHIC-SPECIFIC BLOGGING

Most products and services are targeted at a number of different audiences, but traditional mass marketing requires some compromises in order to reach the widest variety of possible

customers. Blogs don't have that same constraint; it's possible (and cost-effective) to target a single specific audience and communicate to them in their own language.

For example, Stonyfield Farm is well-known for their organic dairy products, such as yogurt. But while it's a product that can be purchased by almost anyone, one of its key audiences is a new parent. To reach that specific group of customers, Stonyfield created the Baby Babble blog (<http://stonyfield.typepad.com/babybabble>), focused on the health concerns that new parents have about their children's diets.

PRODUCT/CAMPAIGN-SPECIFIC BLOGGING

It's common for more than one of your products to be appropriate for your audience—who may have more of an understanding of its uses. To take advantage of that connection, it often makes sense to create a single blog for each distinct product or brand that you offer. As an example, during the 2006 Winter Olympics, Visa wanted to communicate a specific message behind their sponsorship of athletes in the games, as opposed to a general promotion of the Visa brand. To that end, Visa created a blog called "The Journey," with contributions from a number of Olympic athletes, each using Movable Type to share their own perspective on their games with the world.

This unique channel reinforced the core branding message Visa was looking to promote, but was addressed specifically to an audience that was invested in these individuals and their stories. By using TypePad as a simple platform for sharing that message, Visa was able to cut through the clutter that may have resulted if the blog were trying to address all of the campaigns Visa promotes.

A VOICE FOR EXECUTIVES

It's valuable to be seen as an innovator and leader in your area. . And first-person blogs from a company's founders or executives can position you as such quickly and easily. A "leadership blog" can talk about challenges that face your entire industry, describe overarching strategies that explain new products and services, or provide examples of the traits that make your company unique.

For example, Alacra (<http://www.alacra.com/>) provides business information services to financial and professional services firms. As part of their effort to demonstrate Alacra's expertise in managing and presenting important business information, Alacra CEO Steve Goldstein maintains a blog at <http://www.alacrablog.com/>, using the TypePad service to easily keep customers (and potential customers) up to date.

If you've decided to use a senior executive as the voice of one of your company's blogs:

- It's okay to update infrequently. *Whole Foods* CEO John Mackey only updates when he has something significant to say, and tools like email subscriptions or feeds make it easy for people to get the updates in a timely fashion.
- It's okay to get help in writing a blog. Some executives aren't natural writers/bloggers, and even the ones who are will have busy schedules that might preclude extensive research or copy editing. Just make it clear that there's a team effort involved, and readers will be happy just to see you engaging in a dialogue.

Guide to creating a blogging policy

WHY YOU NEED A BLOGGING POLICY

Blogging is all about communication, and whenever people talk, there will sometimes be miscommunication. The key is to use the medium appropriately and to set proper expectations.

Immediate communication is fantastic for sending timely updates, but it unfortunately also lets people share ideas without thinking them through, while in the heat of emotion, or before they've had a chance to do proper research. And tools like search engines that record and index content mean that a lot of what we say through blogs can be considered permanently "on the record."

The danger isn't from blogs, it's from the fact that *any* of us can talk to the whole world at any time. Whether your staff is talking too loudly in the supermarket, is taking ill-considered pictures with a camera phone, or forwards an email to *The New York Times*, you'll need to have a smart policy that adapts to all the new risks of communicating in our culture.

THE #1 RULE: HAVE A HOTLINE

Above all else, your staff needs to feel comfortable in situations that could possibly be contentious or risky. This means that *before* they update a blog or submit a comment on a site, they must have a place to go to verify its appropriateness.

Here's what to do: **Create a single point of contact where any question about appropriate communication can be addressed**, such as a single phone number or email address. This is an increasingly important requirement regardless of whether your company uses blogs or not. Encourage all members of your team to contact the hotline whenever there are *any* concerns or qualms about something that's going to be posted on a blog.

Most organizations that are blogging today have found that creating such a hotline does not require an extensive investment of resources. The mere idea of having a point of contact encourages employees to be responsible with what they say, and most questions are quickly



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answered by reviewing the message against the terms of your company's blogging policy as well as its general human resources, trade secrets and nondisclosure policies.

KEY AREAS OF RISK

Blog posts or comments about the personal life or traits of any individual, company financial information, legal proceedings, material statements about publicly-traded companies, trade secrets, or mentions of competitors or partners should clearly be off-limits in almost any organization. In addition, organizations with government relationships or in high-security industries will likely have a lengthy additional list of content constraints.

In most organizations, a good rule of thumb is that employees should not blog about any message that they wouldn't be comfortable having appear in a newspaper or on the evening news. Similarly, people who are publicly identifiable as company employees should often consider their statements as if they are representing their employer.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Make your policies as consistent as possible, whether regarding blogging or any other behavior that employees are likely to engage. Understand that blogging is not fundamentally different than creating home videos and sharing them, or in writing a letter to the editor of a newspaper.

LEARN FROM EXAMPLE

Creating a blogging policy can seem complex. Fortunately, many organizations (including those with more employees and more lawyers than your company probably has) have already created some useful policies. They've generously shared their results for other companies that want to get started.

We've collected some of the first, best examples, for your own research. Of course, you'll want to seek legal advice and the counsel of your own company's own leadership before deploying or approving any final policy.

IBM

IBM was one of the first large organizations to fully embrace blogging, and their commitment didn't end with use of the new medium. IBM's management enlisted the help of their employees to help define their blogging policy, and then made the final results available on the web.

See: http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/dw_blog_comments.jspa?blog=351&entry=81328

YAHOO

Yahoo has made available a similar set of blogging guidelines, which can also form an excellent place to start in creating your policy.

See: <http://jeremy.zawodny.com/yahoo/yahoo-blog-guidelines.pdf>

EFF

The Electronic Frontiers Foundation helps protect people's rights online, and as part of their mandate, their team has created a Legal Guide for Bloggers. Many key legal issues are addressed in the broad-ranging guide.

See: <http://www.eff.org/bloggers/lg/>

Starting small

One key tactic in deploying blogs is to understand that the first steps rarely resemble the finished product. So, it's important to have a framework for making changes and improvements in response to feedback from your community.

THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS

There's **more than one way to do run a blog**. Though having an open dialogue or voice are important goals, it's sometimes easier to achieve them by starting from a more conservative position and allowing people in your organization time to get used to the changes .

For example, Boeing's Vice President of Marketing, Randy Baseler maintains a public blog called "Randy's Journal" on the Boeing.com website. Initially, the blog lacked some details that people have come to expect with public blogs, such as feeds, search, archived posts organized by category, and other features that tools such as Movable Type and TypePad provide automatically. As a result, Boeing retooled the blog and posted about what they'd decided to do:

The blogosphere exists so people can talk about whatever they want to talk about. Here, we're going to talk about the future of flight. The exciting things on the horizon for air travelers. The new trends and technologies that are shaping this exciting industry. Quite a few people have emailed to say that they've very much enjoyed reading about just those things in this blog.

(From http://www.boeing.com/andy/archives/2005/04/trading_spaces.html)

In addition, the company posted about what they would *not* be doing, saying "Sure, we're going to post some of your comments. Even critical ones. But it's not a free-for-all." It was an effective, and striking, example of how being straightforward with the community helped earned their respect, and even their support.

SET PROPER EXPECTATIONS

One important lesson to be learned is that, by defining a set of expectations for your blog and its community, it's easy to avoid problems. And naturally, that's vastly preferable to having to deal with those problems as they arise.

Community expectations can cover many things, but here's a short list of some guidelines you might want to address early on in your blog's deployment.

- Tone and tenor of discussion (i.e., "Because this blog is being maintained in a professional environment, we expect your words to be the same ones you would use in a meeting room in front of the same people.")
- Procedural or functional limitations (i.e., "Your comments or feedback will not appear on this blog until they have been approved by the blog owner.")
- The intended subject matter of your blog (i.e., "This blog is about product marketing issues, not discussion of accounting or finances.")
- Topics that are explicitly off-limits (i.e., "Any personnel or human resources issues should *never* be discussed in a blog post or in this blog's comments section.")
- Stylistic or aesthetic concerns (i.e., "Comments that include images or pictures will be subject to approval by the blog's author before they will be published.")

The same techniques can be used on internal-facing blogs. Set a clear expectation that employees shouldn't see a blog's feedback feature as a venue for unfettered criticism. Management or blog administrators can express a policy early in the blog's deployment that outlines the topic of the blog as well as which messages are appropriate for discussion.

USE YOUR COMMUNITY FOR FEEDBACK

As noted in the Boeing example above, most bloggers aren't shy about suggesting improvements and changes they'd like to see in a public-facing blog. In those cases, it may be enough to capture their feedback using a standard email or contact form. Once suggestions have been put into place, a periodic review process can help judge the relative merits of each suggestion, estimate the amount of work required to implement changes, and then prioritize agreed-upon changes. It's important for your community to understand that not all suggestions will be implemented, and explaining the rationale behind the choices that are made can go a long way toward meeting the expectations of your community.

With internal blogs, it may sometimes be harder to collect feedback. Some staff members may be reluctant to suggest changes due to concerns about how their ideas will be received, and some users in business situations may just be unfamiliar with blogging in general. So it makes



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sense to solicit blog feedback in person, in informal roundtables, or in email or voice mail format. These methods complement the standard contact form or help ticket systems that most organizations use for requesting technical improvements, and have the benefit of helping to understand the ways that your staff is making use of the blogs you've deployed.

your blogging community

Why you need to keep track of blogs

One of the first issues most organizations face in starting to work with blogs is that they're concerned what bloggers are saying—or will say—about their products, services, brands, or company. **The fact is the conversation about your company and its work is already taking place even without a blog**, so you need to be aware of it and then, when you're ready, participate in it. All of us who care about the work we do want to reach out to our customers, partners and employees. The potential benefits are many, because with a blog you can:

Some bloggers, even though they may have a lot of readers or traffic, just aren't relevant to your business. If you sell yarn to knitters, a technology blogger who has 50,000 readers might say something really good or really bad about your product, but it might not make a difference regardless.

- That's not to say popular bloggers are bad people, or that you shouldn't be nice to them, but if someone makes a generic list of "blogs you oughtta be reading," you should take it with a grain of salt. It's easy for someone who's influential with one audience to think that they're influential with *all* audiences, but it isn't necessarily so. Prioritize your Learn more about what your customers want
- Find out about issues which aren't problems now, but could become worse in the future
- Discover ideas for new products or services, or suggestions for improvements to existing offerings
- Help direct conversations about your industry in directions that emphasize your company's value
- Provide a voice for your company and show potential customers or partners that you're willing to listen
- Empower your employees by letting them demonstrate their expertise
- Identify testimonials, blogs, and praise that can be fuel for your own marketing, promotional, or blogging efforts

Don't panic! They're not out to get you

A lot of attention has been paid to companies which were caught unaware while a conversation about their products or services swept across a number of blogs, reached some of the more prominent sites, and eventually broke into the mainstream media on television, radio or in print. But this is *not* the main reason you should keep track of blog conversations about your company. This is:

Some companies may face bad PR from blogs; all companies have the opportunity to have a positive conversation through blogs.

How to track your company or brand

Once you've decided that the conversations taking place in blogs are important to your business, you'll want to start following the dialogue so that you can be aware of any issues that arise. And eventually, you'll want to use that information to help your company respond or to provide fodder for your own blogging efforts.

Fortunately, tracking blogs can be a straightforward effort, requiring almost no expense and very little dedicated time.

USE SIMPLE SEARCHING TOOLS

The first and simplest way to find out what public blogs are saying about your company or your industry is to search using the popular web search services. Google, Yahoo, and MSN among others. All three services tend to favor blog content above other types of web pages because the information on blogs is frequently updated, well presented, and often formatted in a manner that's easier for the search engines to index.

To begin, just search for your company, product names, or for terms related to your industry such as competitor's names or issues that impact your business. On almost all these services, you'll be able to get an XML Feed of your search results (see "About Feeds"). With this feed, you're automatically notified when any new item that meets your criteria shows up on the web. You can often subscribe to be notified of new items by other channels as well, making new items show up as emails in your inbox, via instant message, or even as a text message to your mobile phone.

Once you're familiar with the basics of these search systems, you'll want to refine your search terms over time to eliminate any spurious results and to improve the quality of results. You'll also find that many of the results of standard web searches may be mentions in general-interest or trade press, which may be areas you already track using standard press monitoring services.

The next step after learning to track the web at large is to focus on searching within blogs.

USE SERVICES DESIGNED TO TRACK BLOGS

The web search services mentioned above usually provide search engines designed specifically for tracking updates in blogs or on news sites. For example:

- **Google Blog Search** is available at <http://blogsearch.google.com/>
- **Yahoo News Search** includes blogs. See <http://news.search.yahoo.com/>

But in addition to the general web search services, a number of newer sites have sprung up specifically around the task of tracking information that appears in blogs. These sites present mentions of your keywords as they happen, making it easy to stay on top of conversations that may be bubbling up. Some key services to watch:

- **Technorati**: Among the first and most popular services: <http://www.technorati.com/>
- **PubSub**: Matches search terms as they appear on blogs: <http://www.pubsub.com/>
- **IceRocket**: One of the newer services available: <http://www.icerocket.com/>
- **BlogPulse**: Intelliseek service with business features: <http://www.blogpulse.com/>

Any of these tools can complement standard web searches, and again, you'll want to track results from each service using an XML Feed. It's easy to combine the results of all these feeds into one continuous stream, and then check that source for updates once or twice a day to get a feel for the blog conversations that are taking place.

Of course, **this does take some time**. If you don't have the time or resources to do it yourself, you'll want to engage an organization that can monitor blogs, look for topics that pertain to your company, and alert you to any issues or concerns that arise. More on this below.

ENGAGE A PROFESSIONAL SERVICES ORGANIZATION THAT MONITORS BLOGS

If you decide that monitoring blogs is important enough to warrant dedicated resources, there are a number of organizations which perform this service for businesses.

Companies that offer community tracking, sentiment tracking, online monitoring, or brand management services often integrate blog tracking into their existing products. But if your vendors don't provide this service yet, or you don't already engage a vendor for these services, it's easy to review a few of the more prominent providers:

- **Intelliseek**: Creators of the BlogPulse service mentioned above, Intelliseek (<http://www.intelliseek.com/>) has merged with Nielsen's BuzzMetrics service and has integrated blog tracking with its overall media tracking services.

- **Cymfony:** Cymfony (<http://www.cymfony.com/>) focuses on tracking and monitoring consumer-generated media and is partnered with PubSub, mentioned above, for providing analysis of blog content.

There are, of course, many additional providers, and many of the consultants and professionals who deploy blogs also offer services to help track and monitor conversations that take place in blogs. You may also wish to use these services as a starting point for developing your own in-house blog tracking practices.

If your company deploys multiple blogs you'll want to find similar tools for tracking private blogs.

How do I know which bloggers matter?

Cultivating relationships with the bloggers that influence and affect your industry is crucial to your growth and greater success. You'll need to figure out which bloggers are central to your industry, and engage them in a conversation that (hopefully!) wins them over to seeing your company as valuable. The key here is to **be of service to the bloggers in your community**, and in return these bloggers will be a resource you can call upon in the future. To start:

IDENTIFY RELATED TOPICS

As you start reaching out to the blogosphere, you may have to look a bit outside of your usual areas of expertise. For some niche businesses, or in areas such as finance, heavy industry, manufacturing, or defense technologies, it's possible that general bloggers don't really discuss your business at all. As a result, you should discover which topics bloggers are talking about that can impact your business even if your company name isn't mentioned.

For example, if your company is involved in supplying raw materials, you may wish to look for news and discussions about the manufacturers that purchase your products, as well as others involved in your supply chain. That way, even if bloggers aren't discussing your own products, you can anticipate how blog conversations could impact your business.

USE SERVICES DESIGNED TO DISCOVER BLOGS

So you've found some individual blog *posts* that are relevant to your company, what about entire *blogs*? There are often blogs that specialize in your industry or in talking about your products. If you have an active community of bloggers that are interested in your company, make sure to proactively track those bloggers and initiate contact with them.

The tools for this task are slightly different than those used to search for individual blog posts, though they are often run by the same companies that do blog search. Here are some examples:

- **Technorati:** Among the first and most popular services, Technorati offers individual profiles that give you information about a blog:
<http://www.technorati.com/>
- **Kinja:** An older service, Kinja has “info cards” for many of the most popular blogs, with information about related sites and detailed data about the blog:
<http://www.kinja.com/>
- **Google Blog Search:** The name is a little ambiguous, since Google’s service both searches for blogs and within blogs. But don’t worry—the results at the top of a search are blogs that are about a particular topic, not just ones that mention that word:
<http://blogsearch.google.com/>

FINDING THE BLOGGERS THAT MATTER

Now you’re ready to find those key bloggers. It’s pretty straightforward—you can get started discovering the influential blogs in a community in just a few minutes.

Let’s use knitting products as an example. The knitting community is a large and active segment of the blogosphere, though they don’t get as much attention as blogs about politics or technology. This is partially because the traffic in the community is spread out over a much larger number of medium-sized blogs, instead of being routed through a few giant blogs.

To get started, search on Google Blog Search for “knitting blog.” Most of the time, these general searches will yield a few group blogs, designed to be hubs for a community of contributors. It’s a great idea, but unfortunately, about half the time the owners of these sites fail to attract an audience. So you end up with a community blog that is kind of a ghost town—lots of links to the blog, some prominent placement in a search engine, but very few active bloggers other than, possibly, the person who runs the site.

You might also find some spam blogs. Just because someone registers *official-knitting-blog.com*, it doesn’t mean they’re passionate about the topic—they might just be trying to show up in the search results for those terms so that they can run advertising. So keep a skeptical eye out for sites that seem to be low on content but high in the search results.

Discounting any spam blogs or ghost community sites, you’ll find a bunch of really good blogs from the passionate members of a community. Take a look at the sidebars of a few blogs, see if they keep a blogroll—a list of links to the sites they like. Then, skim some posts and see if



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there are any sites that they regularly link to. (For this example, you're not interested in links to regular news sites like CNN.com or Yahoo.)

KNOW WHO *DOESN'T* COUNT

There's just no nice way to put it—some bloggers, even though they may have a lot of readers or traffic, just aren't relevant to your business. If you sell yarn to knitters, a technology blogger who has 50,000 readers might say something really good or really bad about your product, but it might not make a difference regardless.

That's not to say popular bloggers are bad people, or that you shouldn't be nice to them, but if someone makes a generic list of "blogs you oughtta be reading," you should take it with a grain of salt. It's easy for someone who's influential with one audience to think that they're influential with *all* audiences, but it isn't necessarily so. Prioritize your conversations with the bloggers who matter in *your* niche.



blog deployment

Evaluating blogging platforms

We've provided some guidelines about how to evaluate the companies which offer blogging solutions. Obviously, we at Six Apart we're a blogging solutions vendor, so we're biased. But we think you'll find the overall framework useful and we're eager to talk both about the areas where we excel as well as the areas where we're striving to improve. **More companies have chosen Six Apart's platforms to power their business blogs than any other provider.** Based on our experience in helping businesses get started with Movable Type and TypePad, we think you'll come to the same decision once you've considered all of these criteria.

VENDOR SUPPORT

The single most important thing to consider about your vendor is the relationship you'll have with them. What should you look for in a vendor? Ideally, one who:

- Provides professional technical support
- Understands your needs
- Focuses on business solutions
- Offers extensive expertise and background in blogging

With that in mind, choose a vendor and a technology platform that offers professional support, including technical support for the software solution itself. Your first concern should be your technology provider's familiarity with your particular needs. This can be judged by looking at current blog deployments in your industry as well as the responsiveness of your own interactions with the vendor.

As blogging grows in popularity, a lot of companies will enter the market despite not having experience in business blogging. Make sure the technology you're considering is appropriate for business use, and ensure that your blogging platform is a tool, not a "toolkit" that you have to finish assembling yourself.

One of the biggest benefits of blogging is that it's easy enough that people *want* to participate—attaching a blogging function to a system that's too complex to use negates the benefits of simple information sharing.

Our take: At Six Apart, blogging is what we do, in all its forms, for every audience that can benefit from blogging. We make sure our tools integrate well with the other technology you



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have, because our focus is on making our platforms the most manageable and reliable blogging tools available.

COMMUNITY AND THIRD-PARTY SUPPORT

Another way to judge the health and viability of a platform provider is to look at the community and partnerships that extend beyond the vendor itself. Industry alliances, support for technology standards, a robust network of third-party systems integrators and consultants—the presence of each of these elements is a key indicator that you can rely on a particular vendor.

Some of the third-party offerings that show the robustness of a blogging solution are the availability of independent books and guides, the number of professional consultants that make a living using the platforms, and the number of different markets or geographical regions in which the vendor has a presence.

Our take: Six Apart is a key platform provider for most of the largest business blogs in the world. Our dedicated community, the Six Apart Professional Network, consists of thousands of developers, designers, consultants, systems integrators, and IT professionals worldwide and, all of them build their careers on Six Apart's blogging platforms.

EXTENSIBILITY, CUSTOMIZABILITY AND OPENNESS

Because blogs are a tool of expression and communication, it's key that information can easily be entered into the system from your other applications and then presented in whatever format you prefer.

Some of the key blogging interoperability standards to look for:

- **Atom (IETF RFC 4287):** content syndication format and publishing API
- **RSS:** content syndication format
- **TrackBack:** protocol for automatic creation of links between sites
- **XHTML and CSS:** Web standards for defining page structure and presentation

Most importantly, make sure the critical data you enter into your system isn't locked into the application. Support for open formats and multiple platforms ensure you can integrate or migrate your data as needed.

Our take: All Six Apart platforms support all of the formats and protocols listed above. In addition, we've helped create the IETF Atom and TrackBack specifications, leading the move towards open standards in the blogging industry.

We also make our de facto standards as open as possible, such as our templating and styles system. The structure, layout, and tag elements of the templating system shared by Movable



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Type and TypePad are fully documented and have been implemented in platforms such as Adobe GoLive and Dreamweaver, as well as numerous third-party tools.

In addition, we support full access to all application programming interfaces (APIs) for our platforms without requiring any kind of licensing agreement or additional payments. **All Six Apart platforms support full import and export of your data at any time**, whether for backup purposes or for integration with your other applications.

CUSTOMER REFERENCES

The one simple requirement for all of the software choices you make is that you should be able to talk to existing users and find out about their experiences. Look for references within your specific industry, deployments that have been in place for an extended period of time and the amount of investment that companies have made in their deployments.

Our take: At Six Apart, we're proud to say that most of our new customers come from referrals of our current customers. Many of our largest customers are so pleased with their experience with Six Apart platforms that they elect to promote a "Powered by Movable Type" or "Powered by TypePad" link on their site. And we've got deployments in key industries which have been in continuous successful operation for years—that's a long time in the blogging space.

What's more, many of our largest deployments have built entire workflows and custom applications on top of our platforms. That kind of investment reflects the trust and investment that our customers place in Six Apart.



INDUSTRY REPUTATION

In addition to the word of existing customers, it pays to listen to the overall sentiment about a vendor's products, management, business practices, and financial stability. Both press reports and word-of-mouth are useful tools in helping to judge a company, along with your own interactions in communicating with the company. Consider a vendor's reputation for innovation, and consistency of focus over time as well. The bottom line is that you want a vendor who is committed to your success with blogs.

Our take: Six Apart is the largest independent blogging company in the world, with millions of users. We've earned endorsements from many of the most experienced and respected bloggers and businesses in the world, and have been highlighted by the press as leaders in the technology industry. We were among the first providers of professional-class blogging platforms, with resources like our Business Blogging Guide as evidence of our hard-earned experience.

About feeds

Many websites have links labeled “XML” or “RSS” or “Atom.” All of these are ways of saying that you can find out about updates to that site without having to browse it yourself.

This feature is referred to as Syndication or Aggregation, or sometimes it’s just called Subscribing. On some sites, instead of a link, they’ll have an orange button that might say RSS or XML, which can look like  or . That’s a sign that the page you’re viewing has a feed available.

WHO PUBLISHES FEEDS?

Anyone that publishes on the web can publish a feed. Blogs (or weblogs) were one of the first types of sites to offer feeds, and since that’s what we do at Six Apart, we’re glad they’re so popular. But major newspapers and news websites, hobbyist sites, and even retailers like Amazon.com all offer feeds.

WHAT DO I NEED?

Just like when you want to watch a video clip or listen to music on the web, you need a “player” of some kind to subscribe to feeds. The good news is, there are number of these tools available, and many of them are either totally free or free to try out.

The “player” for a feed is called a feed reader. (Sometimes it’s called a news reader or RSS reader or RSS client. All these terms mean the same thing.) This tool lets you subscribe to any feeds you want, checks automatically to see when they’re updated, and then displays the updates for you as they arrive.

Feed readers come in two varieties: web-based, or as an installable program. If you use one of the web-based readers, you can access your feeds from anywhere you go, just by signing into the website that manages your feeds. If you use a feed reading program that installs on your computer, your feeds can be stored for you even if you’re not connected to the Internet.

WHAT FEED READER SHOULD I USE?

We don’t have an official preference, but we’ve listed some of the most popular tools our customers have told us they like.

Our LiveJournal service provides a built-in way for users to read any feed on the web, right on their Friends page, which makes it easy to keep track of all the feeds, journals and blogs that matter to you. Other popular web-based feed readers include Bloglines or NewsGator Online, both of which are free services designed specifically for reading feeds. Most web portal start pages, such as My Yahoo, My MSN, My AOL, and Google Personalized Homepage, allow you to subscribe to feeds and have them display within right on your start page. For business users, may newer intranet or portal applications may have a feed reading feature built in.



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If you prefer a feed reading program that you can install on your computer, you can use FeedDemon or NewsGator for Microsoft Outlook if you're on Microsoft Windows. Both tools are made by the same company as NewsGator online, so you can switch between these programs and the web-based reader at any time. If you're on a Macintosh running OS X, the most popular feed reader is NetNewsWire, which can also connect to the web-based services.

The good news is, feed reading is going to be built into most computers by default in the future. Mac users can already use the built-in support for feeds in the Safari web browser in OS X 10.4, and Microsoft Windows users will have support for feeds in the upcoming version 7 of Internet Explorer. Anyone using the Mozilla Firefox web browser has support for feeds built-in, and feed reading is part of the upcoming Microsoft Windows Vista as well as the next version of Microsoft Office and Microsoft Outlook.

SUBSCRIBING TO FEEDS

Once you've got a tool to read feeds, you'll want to find some feeds worth reading. Many of the tools listed above provide some built-in feeds to get you started. Then, as you visit other sites on the web, you can keep your eyes open for links that say XML or RSS or Syndication, or for that orange button up above, and add the feeds you find interesting.

Naturally, we think you should check out our company's feed, too. It's called the *Six Apart News Feed*, and it offers information from all of our blogs.

PUBLISHING A FEED

If you're taken by the convenience and power of being able to deliver information regularly right to the screens of anyone who's interested, you might want to publish your own feed. It's surprisingly easy.

We make blogging tools here at Six Apart, which let any person or organization easily share their ideas with their friends, family, coworkers, peers, or the world at large. All of our tools, such as Movable Type, TypePad, and LiveJournal, publish feeds automatically, without you having to set up anything.

TECHNICAL DETAILS: WHAT IS AN XML FEED?

Feeds are small files, much like a web page. Feeds have a special format that lets you collect information from a wide variety of sites and display the updates all in one place, as they happen.

Most feeds are offered for free, to encourage you to read the site that publishes them, or so you'll click on the links in the feed. Almost any information that's updated regularly is a good candidate for being offered as a feed.

RSS stands for "Really Simple Syndication," and Atom is a name, not an acronym.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE VARIOUS FORMATS?

For anyone reading feeds, the various versions of RSS and Atom should offer similar experiences. At a technical level, RSS is focused on making simple syndication very easy, and is the older and more widely-published format. Atom is a web standard from the IETF, one of the standard bodies that's helped define the web, and is more focused on enabling both reading and writing of content with a single format. At Six Apart, all of our tools support both formats equally.

WHAT IS PODCASTING?

Podcasting is the popular name for using special feeds to distribute media files like songs, audio files, photos or even video. Feed readers that support podcasting will automatically download the media files in a podcast feed and then copy them to a portable device or to your computer for you to listen to whenever you want.

Many people listen to podcast audio files on an Apple iPod, which inspired the name. But podcasting can be any kind of file on any kind of device, delivered by subscribing to a feed.

About TrackBack

WHAT IS TRACKBACK?

TrackBack is a system that lets your web pages show when another site has created a link to them. Originally created to enable easier conversations between different blogs, TrackBack is now enabled on over fifty million pages on blogs, news websites, and press releases around the world.

TrackBack generally works automatically, displaying a link on your page back to the site of the person who has something to say about what you wrote. The technology behind TrackBack is an open specification, meaning that anyone can enable the feature on any web publishing system, without having to use any particular software application.

WHY WOULD I WANT TO USE IT?

TrackBack presents a number of benefits for a site owner. It encourages accountability by requiring anyone who wants to comment on your content to have their own page host the content. Those who might be inclined to leave anonymous or negative comments are much less likely to do so when their words would have to appear on their own website as well.

TrackBack also creates a deeper web of links between your site and others that discuss similar topics. More links mean it's easier for readers to find your conversations, and easier to judge the volume of discussion that's taking place. Most communities also place some social benefits around TrackBack links that are created, since linking out to other sites in the community is seen as an act of generosity, or of contributing to something of a gift economy.



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ARE THERE ANY CHALLENGES WITH TRACKBACK?

TrackBack can present some challenges to site owners if the content that is being linked to from other sites is objectionable or inaccurate. Most modern software allows you to filter or manage the content of TrackBack links that appear on your site, but this can introduce some management overhead in enabling the feature.

In addition, TrackBack has been subject to spamming at times. Business blogging platforms generally include tools for moderating or filtering TrackBack links that appear to be junk or spam, but older sites are often still susceptible to TrackBack spam attacks if their software has not been upgraded.

WHAT'S COMING NEXT WITH TRACKBACK?

TrackBack was created for a world in which there were only a few tens of thousands of blogs, and as a result some newer requirements such as authentication or additional features have yet to be addressed. In order to provide a predictable way to add these features, Six Apart (which created the TrackBack specification) has declared the intent to make TrackBack an open Internet standard, and most other major companies involved in blogging and web publishing have joined the effort.

It's likely that TrackBack will be used to communicate much richer messages; with much more control over which content is being shared. As the standardization process progresses, we should see new features for automatic linking between sites develop and be deployed.