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Blogs a 'great outlet for boosting credibility'

By Jaime Leick

Green Bay's Dana VanDen Heuvel recently took top honors in a national weblog competition. He won the Marketing Sherpa Readers' Choice Award for Best Business-to-Business Marketing Blog for his Weblog, "Dana's Blog: Internet Marketing and Sales Technology Ideas From the Trenches."

Marketing Sherpa is a media company best known for its Internet site MarketingSherpa.com. They publish case studies, data and best practices for marketing, advertising, and public relations professionals.

In April, Marketing Sherpa asked more than 173,000 readers to nominate their favorite marketing, advertising and PR blogs. They took suggestions, narrowed the nominees to 29 candidates, and asked for a final vote. More than 800 readers participated in the balloting that earned VanDen Heuvel his prize

Well, actually, there wasn't much of a prize - just a t-shirt. But the associated PR has been good. VanDen Heuvel's (visits) increased threefold in the days after the announcement. Normally, he gets about 200 visitors a day, not counting readers who are getting daily site summaries through RSS feeds. (More on that in a later column.)

Blog basics

In case it's not obvious, the word blog is a slang term for Weblog. In its simplest form, a blog is like a journal that's posted on the Internet. Blogs are often updated daily and postings appear in chronological order with the most recent postings at the top.

To get the lingo right, the activity of updating a blog is "blogging" and someone who keeps a blog is a "blogger."

Most blogs are created using simple software that enables people with limited technical skills to update their own blog.

VanDen Heuvel uses Movable Type software to create his. He estimates that 35 to 40 percent of current bloggers use this software.

Blogs can be stand alone or, like VanDen Heuvel's, can be incorporated into a Web site.

Personal and corporate blogs

VanDen Heuvel cites several reasons why people might start a Weblog: personal branding, networking, creative outlet.

Successful bloggers can develop a strong personal brand. Blogs that are consistently updated and generate a regular, active audience establish name awareness and credibility for the blogger.

This personal branding can be valuable to job seekers or to professional who generate business based on their name and credentials.

For job seekers, VanDen Heuvel says a blog adds an extra element that makes a candidate stand out.

"It's a great way for boosting credibility," VanDen Heuvel said. "It's a great way to express that you're not just a doer but you're a thinker."

Active bloggers also develop a network of like-minded professionals from around the worlds. Because these networks aren't based in one localized community, barriers to competition are few and people offer suggestions and resources freely.

As VanDen Heuvel describes the network, blogging can be a system of reciprocity. Help others with their professional endeavors and they'll help you with yours.

"A lot of what people do in business is solving problems," VanDen Heuvel said. "(Blogging) gives you some social capital to work with when you have a problem that they can give you assistance with."

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Branding and networking aside, VanDen Heuvel said another benefit of starting Dana's Blog was simply having an outlet for his thoughts.

VanDen Heuvel points out that blogs can be appropriate for corporate use as well. For business star ups that haven't developed a Web site yet, VanDen Heuvel suggests using blogs as a means of offering some type of public voice.

"This is a great way to immediately put your presence out there rather than letting other people take the conversation away from you," he said.

For new and old companies alike, Weblogs can help develop unique customer relationships.

But just as VanDen Heuvel says companies can use blogs to reach customers, blogs can help develop media relationships, too. Because many journalists toll the Internet for news, companies with regularly update Weblogs are ideal sources.

"Weblogs are inherently time and relevancy driven," VanDen Heuvel said. "They're very press-friendly."

Whether or not a blog is integrated into a corporate Web site depend on how the company wants to be perceived. Blogs that don't carry a strong corporate image can help launch products that may be a departure from a company's grand.

"It's low risk, easy to maintain, and doesn't affect the corporate voice," VanDen Heuvel said.

On the other hand, blogging software offers a simple way to keep regular news and commentary posted on a company Web site so the site is fresh and maintained.

VanDen Heuvel, who recently joined Schneider as the manager of sales operations, also runs BlogSavant, a weblog consulting company. Visit "Dana's Blog" at www.danavan.net/blog

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