

February 22, 2007

Marketing's Role In B2B Blogging

by Laura Ramos

BEST PRACTICES

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Includes Forrester user interview data



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Marketing's Role In B2B Blogging

B2B Marketers Should Enlist Blogs To Support Future Sales Processes

by **Laura Ramos**

with Charlene Li, Merv Adrian, Will McEnroe, Chloe Stromberg, and Jennifer Joseph

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Business blogs can shorten sales cycles when they connect decision-makers to the designers and thought leaders who shape new products and services. Unfortunately, B2B blogs are new and evolving; only a small fraction of Fortune 500 companies sponsor one today. This early state represents both an opportunity and a concern for business marketers, especially early pioneers at high-tech firms where evangelists and engineers lead blogging efforts. Forrester believes that B2B blogs can open the formerly closed borders of corporations to prospects, customers, and investors. Marketing's role here is to leverage good blog content produced by technologists into their sales and PR activities, and create guidelines that keep individual bloggers from exposing inside information or straying off topics into areas that don't support the business.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 2 **B2B Bloggers Brim With Enthusiasm . . .**
- 3 **. . . But B2B Blog Buzz Overshadows Reality**
- 6 **Time To Set B2B Blog Strategy**
- RECOMMENDATIONS
- 8 **Pioneer Blogs With An Eye Toward Sales Processes**
- 10 **Supplemental Material**

NOTES & RESOURCES

Forrester interviewed 20 blog authors and sponsors from Fortune 500 companies and reviewed 60 B2B blogs, including those from Cisco Systems, EDS, Kodak, Microsoft, SunGard, and Xerox.

Related Research Documents

- ["The ROI Of Blogging"](#)
January 24, 2007, Best Practices
- ["Best And Worst Of Blog Design, 2006"](#)
November 15, 2006, Best Practices
- ["B2B Marketers: Are You Ready To Blog?"](#)
October 16, 2006, Best Practices
- ["Blogging: Bubble Or Big Deal?"](#)
November 5, 2004, Best Practices

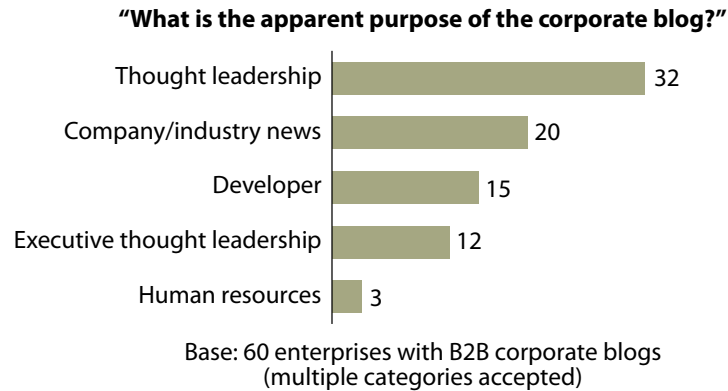
TARGET AUDIENCE

Technology marketing professional

B2B BLOGGERS BRIM WITH ENTHUSIASM . . .

Business-to-business (B2B) marketers ask Forrester where company blogging is heading, which companies get real value from the effort, and whether they should join the growing ranks of corporate bloggers. To explore these questions, we talked to 20 blog authors and sponsors at Fortune 500 (F500) and top technology firms. While blogs barely register on their company's formal marketing radar, bloggers' passion and zeal for this part-time, social journalism is beyond compare. They believe their work exposes the human side of their companies and lets customers hear the otherwise silent voices of dedicated employees. Many contribute personal time to the effort, since blogging accounts for just a fraction of their job responsibilities. Corporate bloggers — and the marketing folks cheering them on — see blogging as a promising communication medium capable of:

- **Increasing influence.** Last year, 57% of business and IT professionals responding to a blog impact study rated blogs equally or more credible than information found in news outlets, industry publications, vendor white papers, analyst reports, and industry or professional associations.¹ B2B bloggers understand that blog readership — and their ability to influence decision-makers — is on the rise (see Figure 1). So they create company blogs to build thought leadership and influence press, analysts, and investors.
- **Creating new customer connections.** Darren Wesemann, CTO for SunGard Financial Systems, explained how blogging allows him to influence not only prospects but also new contacts for current customers. Mr. Wesemann's blog opens up issues for shared discussion and helps him synchronize SunGard's architecture with that of its customers and service their needs better. This work paid off when one of his readers recently asked SunGard via the blog to submit a bid on a new system the customer had out for tender.
- **Paying off big on a relatively minor investment.** Blogging is dirt cheap compared with the cost of advertising, PR, and other mainstream marketing tactics. Moreover, B2B bloggers report that blogs can build trust, fuel publicity and word of mouth, and improve corporate intelligence. While short-term results are insubstantial, bloggers feel that blogs will improve brand perception, create more sales opportunities, and propagate new ideas in the long run.

Figure 1 B2B Blogs Exist To Drive Thought Leadership

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

... BUT B2B BLOG BUZZ OVERSHADOWS REALITY

To evaluate the progress behind the passion, Forrester took a close look at 60 corporate blogs from Fortune 500 and leading technology firms — their audiences, age, numbers of blogs per company, authoring patterns, amount of commentary received, and posting frequency (see Figure 2).² We were surprised to find that only 29 of the F500 show clear evidence of public-facing, business-oriented blogs. Among the 31 high-tech firms to which we extended our review, corporate blogging is still in its earliest stages (see Figure 3). In general, B2B blogs:

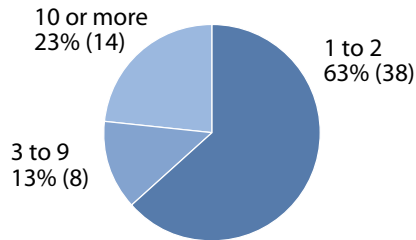
- Lack visibility as a company communication channel.** Due to simple oversight or concerns about the consequences of sanctioning the effort, corporate marketing fails to promote B2B blogs' visibly on the company's Web site, where search engines can pick them up. Only one-quarter of the companies we studied carried a link to their blogs on the home page. We were also surprised how hard it was to find company-sponsored blogs.³ Even general search engines like Google have difficulty returning relevant results for searches like “[company name] blog.”
- Favor technology and technical subjects but lack organization.** Hardware, software, and tech services firms dominate B2B blog ranks; 22 of the 29 F500 companies with B2B blogs offer products catering to IT buyers. More inclined to experiment with new technologies, tech firms encourage engineers, product managers, architects, and chief technologists to speak up and blog independently from the company-sponsored site. As a result, technologists, not marketers, create corporate blog content. For example, Amazon hosts a blog targeting developers even though it's a major online retailer. And a quick look at Oracle or Sun's blog community site shows that more isn't necessarily better; both pages are cluttered with links and names but fail to offer a reasonable way for the B2B user to navigate it all.

- **Struggle to sustain the conversation.** B2B bloggers start out with lofty goals about developing readership and influencing outsiders but find that new, interesting content gets harder to produce after the first few months. Poor usability, uncertain objectives, and few good examples mean that many blogs lose traction as a shared communications channel.⁴ The sometimes dry and esoteric topics bloggers cover make it difficult to engage readers in two-way conversations. Group blogs exacerbate this — half of the ones we reviewed take a team approach to publishing, and 43 out of 60 share little about themselves personally. This is a shame, because, as Alan Cohen, the senior director of Mobility Solutions for Cisco Wireless, told us, “Intimacy in communications is sorely lacking in firms that sell IT.”
- **Can't provide conclusive evidence of blog value.** Enthusiasm among corporate bloggers runs high, but they report small numbers of impressions and visitors, and don't measure their achievements consistently. As Dr. Bill Crouse, healthcare industry director and blogger for Microsoft, points out: “While readership for any particular blog entry may be limited to a few thousand people, the viral nature of the Web exponentially increases the impact of this activity.” Blog impact measures vary, and bloggers cite unique visitors and RSS subscriptions as the key metrics to track. They present anecdotal stories or opinions as evidence that blogs build brand or attract interest, and — while a few of the people we interviewed recounted how specific posts generated unexpected press and PR activity — fewer still can connect this activity directly to lead generation or increased customer intimacy.
- **Want customer intimacy but don't often get it.** With the exception of blogs from star-power CEOs like Sun's Jonathan Schwartz or industry luminaries like Ray Ozzie, commentary and cross-references (trackbacks) on corporate blogs are scarce, and dedicated followers are barely visible. Only six of the blogs reviewed receive one or more comments per posting on a regular basis. B2B readers don't engage because they aren't used to participating in open forums. B2B bloggers can't hold up their end of the conversation because their audience shifts between peers, customers, press, analysts, and investors. “Who reads our blog is the single biggest unknown,” says Mike Minchew, EDS's internet director, of the typical EDS blog reader.

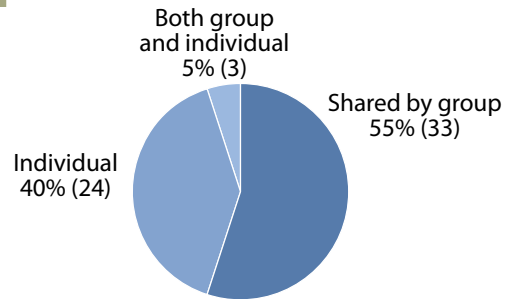
Figure 2 Early Stage Blogs Populate B2B Landscape

A spreadsheet with the list of reviewed blogs is available online.

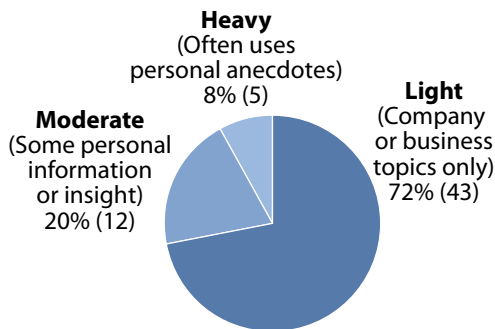
2-1 Number of corporate blogs per company



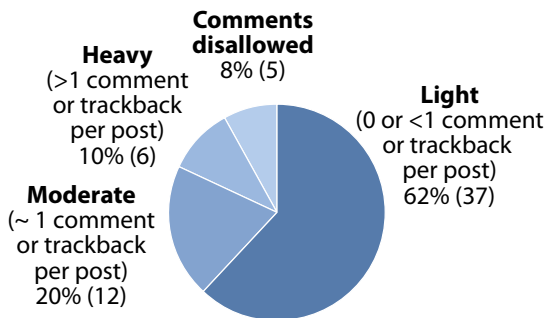
2-2 Type of authorship



2-3 Degree of personal information shared in blogs



2-4 Amount of commentary



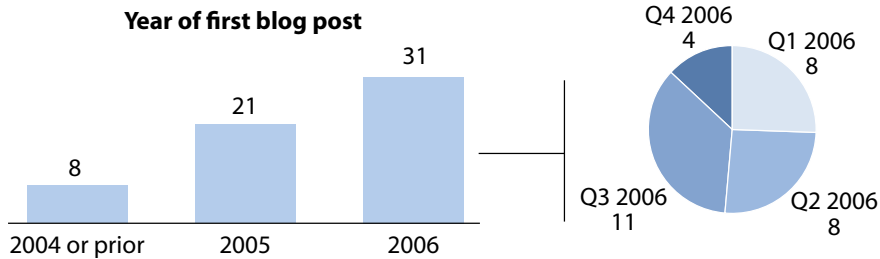
Base: 60 enterprises with B2B corporate blogs (percentages may not total 100 because of rounding)

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 3 B2B Blog Efforts Are On The Rise

"When did B2B firms first start their corporate blogs?"



Base: 60 enterprises with B2B corporate blogs

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Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

TIME TO SET B2B BLOG STRATEGY

Despite these growing pains, we believe blogs have untapped potential as B2B marketing tools capable of creating two-way conversations with prospects that accelerate the purchase process. Why? Because blogs allow decision-makers — and their IT counterparts — to hear directly from the engineers who design products or the call center reps who support them. Well-crafted marketing campaigns should include blog content when appropriate to increase trust and reinforce messages conveyed in other media. But, to quote Dr. Crouse once again, “It is really the sum of the whole that delivers value.” Starting a corporate blog without a strategy to integrate blogging into the corporate communications mix — and give influencers the inside story on product features or the nitty-gritty behind customer successes — will doom the blog to become a propaganda site. Here are the opportunities B2B marketers need to prepare for now in order to make corporate blogs successful in the future:

- **Cut time out of the technology sales process.** Corporate blogs that include communication between engineers and their technical counterparts shorten selling cycles, because prospects not only get the technical lowdown earlier but also gain unique product design insights. For example, IBM targets developers with its developerWorks community pages and narrowly focused blogs.⁵ Blog-fostered relationships pave the way for smoother product demonstrations and negotiations later on. Unlike consumers, who don't need to talk to an engineer before buying Apple's new iPhone, technical folks involved in B2B buying need back-and-forth conversations with different points of view to understand exactly how IT systems, custom industrial equipment, or multiyear outsourcing contracts will work in their situation. Instead of getting this data through the account team — and potentially losing something in the translation — company blogs offer a direct source to the finer points of commercial offerings.
- **Reach audiences that fall outside target markets.** Well-designed Web sites meet specific visitor goals — they don't try to address every need or speak to every corporate message and position point.⁶ Given a set budget, marketers must trade off between audiences and industries as they plan white papers and publish success stories. B2B blogs can fill the gaps Web sites and collateral leave uncovered. Emerson Process Experts features posts from internal experts to illustrate how customers in industries outside their core markets use their products.⁷
- **Increase natural search marketing effectiveness.** To stretch their search marketing budgets, B2B marketers try to optimize their sites for hundreds of terms. Good site design practices — and the complexity of managing this effort — make this difficult. Web masters complain when marketing asks repeatedly for site changes to tweak search results. Feed advertising pioneer Pheedo takes a different approach by incorporating key terms into its corporate blog and making the blog a key component of its Web site. This increases the site's natural position on competitive words, because search engines favor frequently updated content. Using blog posts this way also allows Pheedo to leverage long-tail search terms without purchasing them.

- **Provide the foundation for future communities of interest.** As blogs rapidly become a preferred source for intelligence and product insight, marketers will look for ways to not only attract more eyeballs but also get readers to join the conversation. Informal surveys, virtual focus groups, and exclusive offers for blog readers are a few techniques marketers experiment with today. Two-way conversations bring communities together to share technical or industry-specific interests and keep corporations honest, much as Dell's blog Direct2Dell has done to repair the company's PR image in the wake of recent product and service miscues.⁸ Companies that manage their blog strategy toward this end and treat the blogosphere as an ally rather than a media channel will reap the benefits of greater customer intimacy and dependence.
- **Make everyone part of the selling process.** B2B blogging uncovers employees with a natural flair for endorsing the company. Honest, heartfelt enthusiasm expressed by product designers and call center personnel illustrates a company's values and integrity far better than any press release or publicity event. As blogs facilitate one-to-one communication between employees and external parties, every worker becomes a potential spokesperson for the brand and extends a firm's ability to reach and attract new prospects. Blogs by Microsoft's head of recruiting and EDS's VP of customer support demonstrate where this trend could head in the future.⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

PIONEER BLOGS WITH AN EYE TOWARD SALES PROCESSES

Enthusiastic as corporate bloggers are today, their efforts fall short of creating sustained conversation with customers. Corporate blogs rarely stand in as product specialists or sales engineers to support the B2B buying process. As blogging builds legitimacy as a communication outlet in 2007, Forrester expects marketing to step into the blog monitor role to set policy, mine blog content to support sales and PR activity, build internal intelligence, and champion blog participation. To make blogs deliver leads and build customer loyalty, B2B marketers should focus on how blogging supports the sales process, and:

- **Get prepared.** B2B marketers spend time reading blogs and learning what bloggers say about your industry, company, and competition to understand what your audience wants to hear from you. Determine at which stage in the selling process you expect most of your audience to visit the blog. Find out which topics are important to them and whether your competitors already blog on these subjects. Whether your blog is a solo effort or an ensemble, set expectations about how much time blogging takes. While interviewees said they spend as few as 15 minutes or as many as several hours on a single post, we recommend that each author dedicate an hour or two per day initially and focus on building loyal readership through targeted posts published regularly.
- **Mitigate risks.** Besides setting a corporate blogging policy that conforms to corporate ethics and governance rules, B2B marketers should follow IBM's lead and publish guidelines that set blogger expectations about their responsibility to the company as a spokesperson.¹⁰ Blog policies should include rules that are easy to remember like "write as yourself," "take responsibility for your content," "respect copyrights," and "keep secrets." Create a support system for your bloggers because they can turn up at any level in the company, and your best thinkers may not be your best writers.
- **Think conversation, not message.** Blogs must be interesting, casual, and strike an emotional chord with the people who read them. Corporate blogs that offer exclusive information, a unique angle, or clean entertainment will attract more readers who, in turn, create fertile ground for mutual discussion. It's the B2B marketer's job to encourage but not control, review but never edit. To keep blogs running smoothly, marketers should keep blog topics from straying off topic and work to preserve blogger freedom of expression. As blog conversations grow in this open environment, marketers should monitor blogs to find examples of how they've fueled successful customer conversations — such as how an engineer's posting about a specific product capability helped to educate a customer and shorten the technical review cycle.

- **Prevent blogger burn out.** Most corporate blogs enlist multiple contributors to keep content flowing. The marketer's job is to utilize resources and organize events — such as invitation-only intranet sites and inexpensive catered lunches, respectively — to encourage blogging, while they monitor who gets to blog. Matt Buckley and Paul Joyal at RSA Security cohost a weekly podcast on security issues and summarize podcast content in a blog posting.¹¹ These podcasts feature interviews with luminaries inside RSA and from the security community at large who aren't in a position to contribute to their blog regularly.
- **Capture traffic metrics but measure influence.** Blogs should figure into corporate heuristics that measure influence, customer intimacy, good will, and loyalty. For example, BMC Software measures blog value with metrics that go far beyond subscriptions and views. It branded its blog with a unique name (TalkBMC) that search and brand monitoring engines can track more easily. To judge influence, it looks at metrics like share of blog conversation, content/podcast downloads, and referrals originating from the blog. Constructing and monitoring these metrics can be difficult, but the payoff comes when marketing can connect blog activity to new opportunities and sales.¹²
- **Promote and market corporate blogs.** Accenture features its corporate blog on its home page and gives it equal weight to customer success stories, news, and investor relations. But featuring blogs on one's corporate site is only the beginning. Savvy business marketers must make sure that their blog gets picked up externally — by industry news syndicators and search engines at a minimum. Internally, marketers should highlight blog commentary in their published marketing materials and promote its value to stakeholders in customer service and quality assurance who can benefit from joining blog discussions. Marketing should also recognize bloggers who drive customer conversations by coaching execs to mention specific blog conversations in their presentations and company talks. Today, building blog visibility and accounting for its value is difficult, but blog benefits will become easier to quantify over the next two years as more companies join the blogging ranks and examples of concrete blog investment returns increase.
- **Build transparency and trust with readers.** A corporate blog strategy and plan hinges off a company's readiness to listen to and act on blog feedback. While a policy to accept open comments and not censor dissenting views is a good start, marketers must also review crisis communication processes and manage bad news that surfaces on the blog quickly and truthfully.¹³ Picking a blog thread and imagining or role-playing worst-case outcomes help to prepare for unanticipated reactions from readers or commentators. On a daily basis, marketers should review blog comments, delete spam and malicious posts, and comment on posts personally. Rather than relying solely on bloggers to keep the conversation going, marketers can encourage cross-departmental comments — or references to prior posts — to show how people throughout the company can jump into the blog conversations, add their own insight, and clarify concerns that subtly move the sales process forward.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Online Resource

The underlying spreadsheet detailing the companies and blogs we reviewed in Figure 1 is available online.

Companies Interviewed For This Document

BMC Software	Kodak
Cisco Systems	Microsoft
Dell	RSA
Edelman	Southwest Airlines
Electric Artists	Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide
Electronic Data Systems (EDS)	SunGard
Emerson	Sun Microsystems
Fair Isaac	Verizon
Hewlett-Packard	Wells Fargo
IBM	Xerox

ENDNOTES

- ¹ In August 2006, KnowledgeStorm and Universal McCann fielded an online survey of business and IT professionals on the topics of blogs and RSS. The survey yielded 4,500 responses from business and IT professionals, and the survey results have been quoted in the media. Source: "Emerging Media Series: How Blogs and Real Simple Syndication (RSS) Impact B2B Technology Purchase Decisions," KnowledgeStorm and Universal McCann, September 8, 2006 (<http://www.knowledgestorm.com/search/viewabstract/84548>).
- ² We used two sources to identify 60 large companies with publicly available blogs focused on the B2B market (B2C blogs were excluded). The Fortune 500 Blog Project, an independent volunteer effort to study public-facing corporate blogs, provided the starting point for our research. Source: http://www.blogbusinesssummit.com/fortune500/index.php?title=Main_Page. Because the F500 showing was slim, we expanded our search to the CBR 250, *Computer Business Review's* publicly available list of the 250 largest IT companies based on revenue. The CBR 250 can be found online at <http://www.cbronline.com/cbr250.asp>. The combined result of these two research efforts produced the 60-company base referenced in this report. From this base, we identified and interviewed 20 bloggers and their sponsors.
- ³ The Fortune 500 Blog Project is an independent volunteer effort not driven by any publishing deadlines. We found a few discrepancies between its list of F500 blogs and our own independent research. For example, the Project lists a now-defunct blog for Johnson Controls and a recently acquired subsidiary blog for Time Warner. For these reasons, we suspect that our own list of F500 B2B blogs may also be incomplete.

- ⁴ Forrester evaluated the customer experience of 16 blogs, and not one blog passed our usability tests. To encourage new users to become regular readers, blog owners should make content and functionality easy to find and consume, and follow emerging blog guidelines that help users feel more comfortable participating in online conversations. See the November 15, 2006, Best Practices “[Best And Worst Of Blog Design, 2006](#).”
- ⁵ DeveloperWorks is IBM’s technical resource Web site that provides a wide range of tools, code, and education on the company’s core products as well as on open standards technology such as Web services, wireless, Linux, XML, and Java. It supports more than 60 blogs as of January 2007. By offering resources, IBM’s blogging effort tries to encourage developers to use more open standards in heterogeneous system architectures that rival the single platform strategy Microsoft is known for promoting. Source: <http://www-03.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs>.
- ⁶ To make sure Web sites meet customer needs, Forrester recommends that companies adopt Scenario Design, an approach that judges effectiveness based on how well the site helps users accomplish their goals. See the July 19, 2004, Forrester Big Idea “[Scenario Design: A Disciplined Approach To Customer Experience](#).”
- ⁷ Jim Cahill, the marketing communications manager for the Process Systems and Solutions business of Emerson Process Management, initiated the Emerson Process Experts blog to connect automation professionals with experts inside his company and highlight their individual expertise. Over time, this effort has grown to include blog posts on featured industry segments. Source: <http://www.emersonprocessxperts.com>.
- ⁸ Long before reports of battery defects hit the press spotlight last year, critics felt that Dell was slow to respond to bloggers complaints about product quality and service. Since then, Dell has worked to reverse this perception. In the January 3, 2007, post from Lionel Menchaca, digital media manager, Dell continues to outline its plans for corporate blogging and a commitment to more transparency. Source: “Blog Debate About Dell’s Media Coverage,” <http://direct2dell.com/one2one/archive/2007/01/03/4715.aspx>.
- ⁹ For an example of a blogger who understands the value of personal narrative in blogging, check out the recruiting blog Heather Hamilton sponsors at Microsoft: <http://blogs.msdn.com/heatherleigh>.
- ¹⁰ IBM’s blogging policy and guidelines include an 11-point executive summary that captures the core other bloggers echo when talking about corporate policies. The language is clear, but some of the points could be shorter and more memorable. It is available at: http://www-03.ibm.com/developerworks/blogs/page/jasnell?entry=blogging_ibm. Ray Ozzie/Groove Networks and Sun Microsystems present other examples of corporate blogging policies at <http://www.ozzie.net/blog/2002/08/24.html> and <http://www.sun.com/aboutsun/media/blogs/policy.html>.
- ¹¹ Look for podcast summaries intermingled with blog posts from RSA’s Chief Scientist Burt Kaliski and research scientist Dr. Ari Juels at <http://www.rsasecurity.com/blog>.
- ¹² While blogging’s value can’t be measured precisely, marketers will find that calculating the ROI is possible. Following a three-step process, marketers can identify the key benefits, costs, and risks that blogging presents and understand how blogs can impact business goals. See the January 24, 2007, Best Practices “[The ROI Of Blogging](#).”

¹³ Blogging represents some amount of risk to corporate brands and integrity. B2B marketers should update crisis communication policies to address negative blog commentary specifically. Without crisis intervention, firms fail to answer bloggers and suffer consequences. Policies should clearly spell out who should respond, how they should respond, and what they should track to make sure negative posts don't snowball into more negative publicity. See the October 16, 2006, Best Practices "[B2B Marketers: Are You Ready To Blog?](#)"

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