

## **Blogs, Web 2.0, Newsgroups & Building Relationships**

Web 2.0 is generally taken to mean the sort of interactive services that allow businesses and customers to interact with each other. People are getting very excited about it, saying it is the way forward into a wonderful new world in which the customers help the company build the brand and write the content.

All this is true, up to a point. But to make it work it is a bit more complex than that.

I've spent the last few years trying to understand exactly how this interactive thing works and where the benefits emerge. It's taken me on a journey which has involved writing blogs and building email groups - and trying to get a readership level which makes it all worthwhile.

This paper looks at some of the points I've learned and at what seem to me to be the fundamental principles that lie behind 2.0 and all that it implies.

### **1. Different people**

I've been trying to find out if there are some underlying principles that apply, no matter whom one is addressing. I've chosen fans of Arsenal FC, school administrators, people involved in direct marketing, and teachers.

You'll appreciate the differences at once. Teachers are bound together by the fact that they have degrees and an involvement in teaching and learning, but have interests in very different subject areas. Fans of Arsenal football club range from the highly intelligent with a knowledge of football on a world-wide basis to the guy who can hardly string a few words together but thinks he could do better at team selection than the manager. People interested in marketing range from one-man-bands to brand managers in multi-nationals.

So trying to find something that applies to all of them is difficult - but, it turns out, it is possible.

### **2. Just because it is interactive doesn't make it good**

The Guardian has been highly active in the area of blogs to which registered readers can reply, and it is interesting to analyse the results. Because of my own interest in football I've followed their football pages, and an analysis of the football blogs has shown that the vast majority of people commenting are saying that:

- a) the journalist involved knows nothing and is a disgrace to his/her profession
- b) the other commentators are idiots.

I am not too sure what this does for the brand image of the Guardian, but it certainly is interesting to see the Guardian's own journalists torn to shreds day after day.

### **3. Getting and keeping an audience**

Just because you have a blog or news service doesn't mean you have an audience. You have to find ways to get people interested, and then you have to find ways to keep them there and keep them coming back for more.

In doing my research I have seen a significant number of blogs and news services that are so horribly dull and tedious that it is difficult to imagine anyone reading them ever, other than by mistake.

What you need to remember is that there is no shortage of information – people will read what you have to say if it really grabs them – they won't bother if not.

### **4. To summarise thus far**

- You need to find a way of getting an audience.
- You need to write in such a way that you keep the audience.
- But just having an audience (even a highly active audience) does not mean that you are generating positive images for your company. If the readership is spending its time telling you that you are an idiot, you've got a lot of Web 2.0 activity, but it might not be doing your company much good.

### **5. What Hamilton House did, and what we learned**

We set up a series of news groups to which anyone could contribute, some news groups that allowed communication back to the writer but not directly onto the group, and a series of blogs with and without the option of feedback. Some of these are still in the experimental stage, and I confine my comments to those which have come out of experiment and are now running as full-scale projects.

What we found applied across all our activities, irrespective of the medium and irrespective of the audience....

- a) If you want regular readers, then your readers have to like you. They have to think, "this is a nice person, who writes interesting things". Then they are willing to invest their time in reading you. There is an exception to this – as with the Guardian football blogs – where the readers have in fact taken over, and aside from pointing out that the journalist is an idiot, they are basically writing about their things and arguing with each other. But that is an exception – in every other case there is regular readership because the readers like you.
- b) This means the writer needs a personality. It doesn't mean the writer needs to write about him/herself all the time, but it does mean the writer needs to be identifiable as a real person.
- c) The material needs to be consistent – you can't jump around from one thing to another. But also it can't be repetitive. There is a PR Agency that works for a data company which takes the major direct marketing

story of the day, writes it up, and then tags a bit on the end about how the solution must involve having better data. Green issues? Good data is the key. Postal price rise? Solve your cost problems by de-duping your list. Someone complains that you have sent a promo to a deceased person? Clean up your list. All true, but my goodness it is boringly naff.

- d) What is clear is that you need a good writer with personality – it really can't be left to someone who has no experience of this sort of writing. Get the right person in and, as the report on Google Ad Words vs Blogs points out (reference at the end of the piece), the blog will win every time. But you need the right person in the job.
- e) So, we assume you have a good writer with personality who knows a bit about news groups, blogs and Web 2.0. He/she sets up a news service or a blog. The next thing is to get readers. We've done this in different ways – here are some examples. We set up our news service for school administrators by emailing all the schools and telling them the benefits of it. We also have a website for them, and the service is advertised there. There are also examples of some of the most interesting stuff we've done in the news service. Then we decided to launch the blog, so we told the subscribers to the news service about it. At first we ran news stories on the blog, but the take up was small. So then in 2008 we launched the Diary of a School Administrator – a story that got increasingly surreal. Readership of the blog which in March of that year was just 700 people rose to 3300 in April and 7,000 in May. We have since returned to running news items on this blog, and with very little effort on our part these days the blog jogs along getting around 4000 unique hits a month.
- f) With the blog about Arsenal FC we were in a different world. There are thousands of other such blogs in the blogosphere, and we had to compete with them. We launched in January 2008 and managed to get listed on a website that picks up all the news stories about the club and provides links to them. But, although the readers of the "GoonerNews" site are Arsenal fans, they have a huge list of articles to choose from – often around 20 an hour. Nevertheless by April we had taken the number of readers per month up to 16,000 at which time we analysed which stories were getting the most hits. The answer was that the number of hits related exactly to the way in which the headline of the story was written. The greater the difference between our headline and everyone else's, the greater the hit rate. Applying this knowledge we quickly surpassed our previous highest hit rate, and the blog consistently gets over 300,000 hits a month. In a sense this is just like direct mail – how many people read your mailshot depends on your headline. Same with blogs. The more dramatic you are the more people read.
- g) We have also experimented since January 2001 with news groups. It took us several years to realise the importance of personality and relationship, but once we did, the numbers grew. It is a bit like having a favourite DJ on a radio station. In one sense the DJ is irrelevant – the records are the important bit. But it is the DJ that brings in the

personality and DJs make a huge difference to the ratings. So it is with news groups.

- h) We also run a number of educational blogs which carry a mix of news and adverts. Since 2009 we have been experimenting to increase our hits by setting up links so that news and ads on our blogs are picked up by other websites/blogs and thus reach a wider audience. An example of a site that picks up news from our educational blogs is UK Education News (link below).

## **6. What do we get out of this?**

The Arsenal blog is a pure experiment – although in 2009 I wrote a book based on the Arsenal and promoted it through the blog. To the school administrators we sell courses – they don't get mentioned on the blog, although we are currently experimenting with mentioning a product to see just how much it gets picked up. The blog gives us a positive rating among administrators who do come to us with a very clear idea that we are good people to deal with, having read the blog.

The news services and blogs are used to advertise our direct marketing facilities in between the news items, and those to teachers are used to undertake research on behalf of our clients, as well as sell products. But even when we are selling we retain the same voice of the writer, so that there is a seamless flow between advert, research and commentary. Sales levels from the news groups are very high, as are responses to the research programmes – far higher than anything that can be achieved via other media (including direct mail).

This last point is quite extraordinary. We have advertised products through the news services and via direct mail and found the news service can produce much better results. But – and this is important – it would be wrong to think that the news service is just email – and therefore almost free. What you have to take into account is the cost of running the news service in between the adverts. However, even when that is taken into account it is certainly a highly attractive form of advertising.

And that's it. Web 2.0 and all the stuff around it comes down to the fact that anyone can do it – but to make it happen you need to build a relationship with the people who read and you need to have access to a decent writer. You need to go out and find readers by advertising the service, and you need to have exciting headlines.

If you want to read more and see at first hand what we have done try these...

Article on Blogs vs Google Ad Words:

<http://www.mailing.org.uk/Comparison%20adwords.html>

Untold Arsenal: [www.blog.emiratesstadium.info](http://www.blog.emiratesstadium.info)

Direct Marketing information:

email [direct-mail-secrets-subscribe@yahogroups.com](mailto:direct-mail-secrets-subscribe@yahogroups.com)

Education Management News – <http://www.ukeducationnews.co.uk/>

Schools blog: <http://www.blog.schools.co.uk/>

Education marketing: <http://www.blog.educationmarketing.org.uk/>

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