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# Blogging to Build a Reputation Online

*WSI White Paper*

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## Introduction

*“Dear Diary, you wouldn’t believe what happened to me today...”*

To some of you, reading that introduction brings back memories of the little journal you kept under your pillow growing up (or maybe stories your mother told you about when she was a little girl writing in her “secret” journal). This little book contained all of the important events and happenings of your life. Your first kiss; that time you got grounded for something you didn’t do (of course not); how you were so much smarter than your parents, etc. Whatever the event may have been, if you had a diary/journal this was the place where it was recorded.

Fast forward to the Internet age and this journaling concept has evolved to what we now know as a blog. Actually, the term “blog” is a combination of the terms “web” and “log”, but as technologists typically do, they merged the words into the term that it is today. A blog gives anyone the ability to document whatever they want in a “journal” format. Only now, this process happens entirely online. You can share your thoughts with the entire world (making it “public”) or restrict it to only a select group of friends or customers (“private”). Blogs can be used by individuals to share personal experiences or by large companies to help communicate with their customers, prospects and shareholders. Whatever the purpose, blogs are here to stay and they are becoming a powerful source of information and a credible way to build a reputation online.

## Building Your Reputation

By using a blog, you have the ability to post your thoughts and share what’s important to you, what you know, experiences you’ve had, etc. without having to be a “webmaster” or HTML expert. Whether you’re a self-employed entrepreneur looking to establish yourself as the “expert” in a particular niche, or you’re part of a large corporate team interested in enhancing the company’s image in the public eye, a blog can be one of the best platforms to share your stream of consciousness.

But unlike the diary example provided at the beginning, today people want to share their thoughts with others, and the web provides a platform like no other to make this possible. On a blog, your thoughts and observations can be instantly sent around the world (if you wish), indexed by the search engines and read by hundreds of thousands of people. Your ability to influence your “personal brand” (reputation) can be quite powerful, especially when a blog is shared via some of the other social sites available on the Internet.

## Using Social Media

In addition to your blog, you can (and should) also have a professional profile on LinkedIn, maybe re-connecting with old friends and family members on Facebook or possibly using Twitter to tell the world what you’re up to (in 140 characters or less, of course). You can use these sites (and others) to help distribute your blog content and ensure that the rest of the world, or at least your connections, are aware of what you’re up to. They can be an excellent way to notify your friends and followers of a new blog entry and then bring them back to read the full story and engage with you on your blog.



## Reader Engagement

Once people start to learn more about a blog and discover the ease at which they can publish information on the Internet (text, images, videos, etc.), many ask “so what’s the difference between a blog and a website?” It’s true you can share information easily on the net with a blog and today many blogs look similar to a website. But some of the differentiating features of a blog give readers the ability to “interact” with the author through a process known as commenting. This takes the “one-way” concept of a website where you post information and people read and evolves it into a “two-way” conversation by facilitating engagement with your readers.

### Start a Conversation

First, the very fact that you are enabling visitors to comment on your blog is a step in the right direction. It shows them you are interested in what the readers are thinking and acknowledges the fact that it’s not “all about you”. Think about it from an “offline” perspective for a minute. Would you really want to have a relationship with someone that did all the talking? No. To have a real relationship there needs to be an exchange of thoughts and views - a conversation. A blog gives you this ability.

### Watch the Conversation Evolve

The other element of comments is that once you start having conversations with those that are posting comments, it gives others (who many never comment, but are reading) the benefits of watching the conversation evolve. So even though you may be interacting directly with one or two individuals on the blog, many more will benefit from this “thread” as they too will become familiar with your personality online. What you may even find is that your readers will start interacting with each other, giving you even more insight on what is on their minds (and how you may be able to respond to that in the future). If you’re a business, this process could be used for product research, ad-hoc focus groups, customer satisfaction, etc.

### Help Readers Find Information

Additionally, these posts (or entries) to blogs can be categorized, or tagged, with keywords that help readers find information that’s important to them when they visit your blog. When you create a post, it’s important that you identify what the theme or subject is, and that you add this information as a category or tag. This way when someone wants to find something on your blog quickly, they will easily be able to find what they are looking for.

For example, if you have a blog about dog training and someone visits your site looking for posts specifically about puppies, they can drill down easily and find the two or three articles you’ve written on this subject by clicking on the “puppies” category/tag without having to sift through all of your posts. While used interchangeably here, a “category” is more for topics that occupy a good portion of your blog (much like a table of contents), whereas “tags” can be seen as more micro in nature and similar to keywords or smaller.

## Blogging to Build a Reputation Online

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It's features like these that shift the focus of a blog from the thoughts of the author to the views, opinions and preferences of the reader - a shift that is happening on the Internet in a variety of other "social" sites that are giving people the ability to interact, communicate, debate and share information. In many ways, the concept of blogging was the beginning of what's known today as UGC (user generated content) and this evolution continues today and continues to grow in popularity around the world.

### Comments: For Better or Worse

As stated earlier, a blog provides readers the ability to offer their feedback on what you have posted, making it possible to start and carry on a conversation directly on the blog. It's this added level of engagement and interactivity that makes blogs so popular because not only as a reader do I have the ability to offer my opinion (more publicly than simply sending you an email), but I get to read what others also think about your post. You'll see many blogs where not only are readers commenting on the original post, but on each others' comments - and these debates can get quite extensive.

### Moderating Your Comments

But what happens when someone disagrees with you on your blog? Let's face it, not everyone is comfortable with criticism (especially if it's not exactly "constructive"). Reading someone's negative comments about your most recent post (that likely came from the heart) can feel like a punch in the gut. But not to fear, as they say every cloud has a silver lining.

The good news is you have total control over what appears on your blog through a process called "moderation". Through this process, comments come to you first for review and then you can publish them to your blog. So, in this instance if the comment is completely off topic, uses profanity or in some other way you believe would actually offend fellow readers of your blog, you can keep it from showing up at all.

While some blogs allow un-moderated comments to simply flow to the site without any sort of approval, for most businesses it's recommended that comments are reviewed by someone in the organization before they appear on the blog. By ensuring that someone reviews the comments before posting, it ensures that you have someone in the organization actually **READING** all of the comments. Since you want to use your blog to create dialogue, it's a good idea to ensure that you are aware of all that's being said on your blog by the readers. This also ensures that you can catch any off-topic or offensive comments to keep your blog clean and relevant.

### Commenting on the Comments

The other opportunity hidden behind a negative comment is the ability to turn it into a positive - in the public eye with the rest of the world watching. Let's face it, nobody's perfect. At some point if you are blogging on a regular basis you likely will say something that will inspire someone to disagree with you. When that does happen, you have an opportunity. You can either "moderate" the comment and keep it from your blog, or you can use this as a way to learn, inspire further conversation and best of all, show the world you are open to differing opinions and reveal your character by participating in the conversation. Those who come along later will likely benefit from the conversation by gaining a deeper

## Blogging to Build a Reputation Online

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understanding of not only what you think, but also how you react to others that may not necessarily be “on the same page” as you. This reveals a lot about your character, and can further build your personality (and relationships) with your readers.

### Some Key Elements

While some may argue the best way to start blogging is to “just do it” and get to writing, it’s recommended that you spend some time thinking about some key elements before you just start typing away. By having some sort of a strategic plan for the blogging process, you can increase your chances of success and ensure you stay on track and that your blog will be around for the long haul. Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind and we’ll make the assumption that you are planning to implement a blog for your company or organization (although the same would apply for a personal blog):

- **Target Market & Purpose** - While it may seem like common sense, take some time to determine what you want to accomplish with your blog and who your target market will be. List the key elements this market would be interested in learning more about (not what products or services you can sell them) and that will help you to determine what the focus of your blog should be and how you can provide the audience with value and build your reputation for being a credible source of helpful information.
- **Staff Management & Monitoring** - If you have employees that will be part of the process or others that will be contributing to your blog, you will need to ensure they are aware of your objectives and that you provide some oversight on the process. You will want to ensure that the direction of your blog remains consistent and sometimes getting others involved can muddy the waters if they are not 100% clear on what you are trying to accomplish.
- **Build a Schedule** - While the goal of your blog should not be focused on selling your products and services, if your industry has certain times of the year when talking about a particular subject makes more sense, then plan accordingly. You may be advertising in other areas (such as in the paper or directly on your website) specific products or services during the holiday season, so why not complement this with helpful entries on your blog that provide similar information, but in a more “informational” way? Most businesses have some sort of a marketing calendar, even if it’s only in the owner’s head, and that can be a good editorial guide to follow when you start thinking of building your posts.
- **Content Selection (Yes/No)** - When it comes to content, it’s important to have in mind early on what you will want to talk about. This will be based on many of the decisions mentioned above like your purpose, target market and schedule. But it may be just as important to define what you will NOT talk about on your blog. Maybe your business is in a regulated industry and there are simply some things you cannot put in a blog (or if you do, you have to provide important disclaimer information). Maybe there are touchy subjects in your local community or religion/politics are hot buttons. Whatever the case may be, think about what you don’t want to appear in your blog and make sure that everyone who has the ability to contribute understands and is in agreement.

## Blogging to Build a Reputation Online

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- **Comments and Feedback** - As you know now, the power of comments makes a blog a “conversation” tool and separates it from simply being a website. You will want to decide if you want to moderate comments posted to your blog, and if so, who will be responsible for this moderation process and what you will allow to be posted if the comment is negative in nature. If you are going to moderate comments, ensure that you are prepared to do this quickly, as your readers won’t tolerate slow response times on your blog and if they don’t see their comments posted quickly, they will lose interest and go find another blog that is more responsive.
- **Use of Social Technologies, Media and RSS** - If you are engaged in some of the other social networking sites mentioned earlier, give serious consideration to using these to help distribute your blog and capture more readers. These sites help you to spread the word and get more visitors back to your blog. When they arrive, you can further engage them by adding pictures and even video to engage them further and get your message across. Finally, to keep them informed, you may also want to consider allowing readers to subscribe to an RSS (really simple syndication) feed on your site that allows them to get a feed of your content into their RSS reader and always have the most current information about your blog.
- **Seek Partnerships** - Identify any complementary business partners or influential community members that may be interested in contributing to your blog with a guest post (and you can do the same). If you’re a local business, consider inviting the local Chamber president to write a post that could relate to your industry or the local community. Larger organizations could ask industry experts for information that would be important to your readers. Whatever the case, having a good collection of partners that are able to provide content will save you a bit of work and further expands the information on your site and says a lot about your business.
- **Measuring ROI** - Before you can measure the return on your investment, it’s important to first determine what you want to accomplish (that’s what these questions are for, after all). As an example, if you are looking for longer visitor engagement on your site you can use a tool like Google Analytics to check out “time on site” and see that people are sticking around longer than before you had a blog. This can be an important statistic to track since the longer they are on your site, the more information about YOU they are consuming and reading what you have to say. You can also monitor things like comments, if someone links back to your blog as a resource, etc. All of these will have some impact on your business and hopefully you’ll see a positive movement in your sales numbers over time as readers start to interact and respect you more.
- **Follow Up and Reader Engagement** - If someone posts a comment to your site (positive or negative), the natural response is to of course respond to them via your blog. This is a good idea, but if the comment is something that may be at an extreme end of either spectrum (such as a rave review or a nasty response), it may be to your benefit to try and take the conversation “offline”. In a smaller business you may recognize the person making the comment and already have their phone number in your system. For a larger organization you may have to offer up the option to exchange numbers and connect directly. But in either case, the power of the voice and having a conversation is one that can be quite powerful. Plus, the fact that you

## Blogging to Build a Reputation Online

took the steps to connect and make it more “personal” will say a lot about you and others reading the post will come to appreciate the way you addressed the situation.

- **Research and Keeping Current** - While at the beginning you may have a lot to talk about and coming up with ideas for your posts is easy, but, over time you may experience what happens to so many others... writers block. You draw a blank on what to say, don't feel that you can add any more value and start to get discouraged. One of the best ways to combat this is to arm yourself with a continual flow of information and be aware of what's happening in your industry, local community and any other related areas that someone following your blog would also have an interest in reading about. In the next section we mention a site called Technorati that is an excellent source of blog information, but you likely also have some excellent sources of inspiration around the office in the forms of trade journals, magazines, company events, etc. Remember, to your readers YOU are the expert and while there may be things you think they already know, sharing this information via your blog will keep them coming back to you to learn more. Then, when they are ready to buy you'll be at the top of their list!

### Learn From the Pros

If you are interested in getting more familiar with the concept of blogging, one of the best sites you can visit is Technorati.com. This site is one of the recognized authorities on all things blogging and you can find blogs on just about every topic out there.

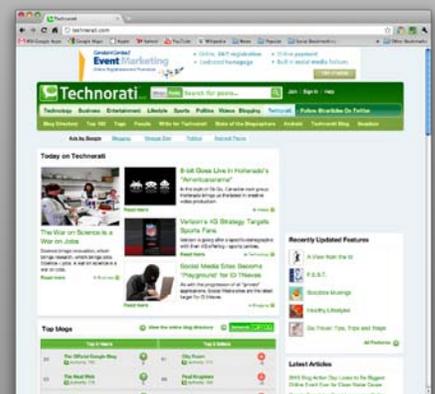
There is a handy search feature at the top that allows you to search for particular blogs or drill down to specific posts about topics you're interested in reading. Enter in some of the keywords for your industry, your products or services, etc. and see what others are saying. After some browsing around you'll get a sense of what people are talking about and maybe even what your competition is doing.

You can also check out the “Top 100” list, which lists the most popular blogs on the Internet. There's even a State of the Blogosphere section where they provide information and statistics about blogging all the way back to 2004. This trip through time will also help put some perspective on how blogs have grown over the years and maybe even provide you with some insight on where they are headed.

### BLOGGING STATS

One of the most trusted sources for blog-related information is the site Technorati. In their most recent State of the Blogosphere report, they have provided some interesting statistics that show just how popular and far-reaching blogs have become:

- Technorati has indexed more than 133 million blogs since 2002.
- Two-thirds of bloggers are male.
- More than half are married and more than half are parents.
- 75% of all bloggers have college degrees and 40% have graduate degrees.
- 25% have an annual household income of \$100k or more.
- 72% say they blog to share their expertise in a particular area or subject.
- It's most common for bloggers to post 2-3 times per week.
- 85% of blogs use tags to help organize content for their readers.
- 56% of bloggers say their blog has helped their company establish themselves as “thought leaders” within their industry and 58% say they are better known in their industry because of their blog.



## It's Time To Get Started...

Hopefully this information has been beneficial to provide you not only with some perspective on the concept and components of blogging, but has also given you some good ideas on how to get started. As you have seen, a blog can be an important element in the “big picture” of building your reputation online and conveying to the world what you know.

The good news is you don't need to worry about making it perfect. Sure, you'll want to have someone proofread and correct the glaring mistakes, but in a blog the occasional typo is ok. Keep in mind, you're not writing a novel; you're sharing your thoughts and opinions and that's the important part. Don't let the fear of perfection keep you from getting started. It may feel awkward at first, but as with anything else, consistency over time brings familiarity and before you know it you'll become a blogging pro.

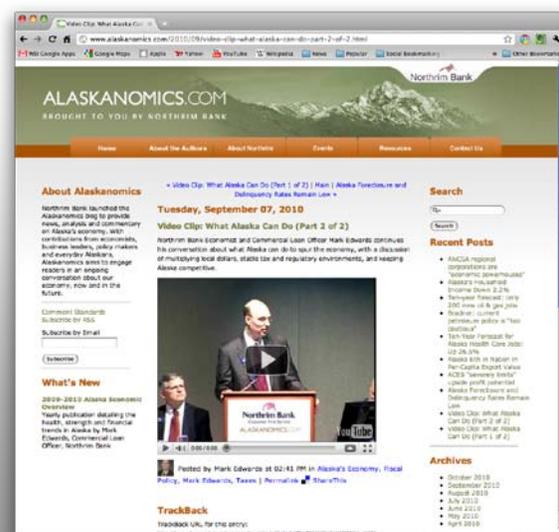
## Blogging Example - [www.alaskanomics.com](http://www.alaskanomics.com)

When you think of banking, the use of a blog may not jump right to mind. However, when Anchorage, AK-based Northrim Bank ([www.northrim.com](http://www.northrim.com)) wanted to enhance its position in the local business banking market, they turned to a blog to help establish themselves as subject matter experts in the business banking community. With the help of WSI the bank created Alaskanomics ([www.alaskanomics.com](http://www.alaskanomics.com)), a blog focused on discussing all things related economics in Alaska.

While the site is branded to look similar to their website, the blog is focused on providing information about doing business in Alaska and the unique economic characteristics of doing business in the northern most state in the U.S. They have employees that are well-versed in economics that are able to write the posts and also feature videos of presentations to make the site a bit more engaging than simply “text on a page”.

### Alaskanomics.com Blog

This blog has started getting references in some of the local news media as a “source” of information, which is exactly what the bank had hoped for. While establishing themselves as a resource, over time it's expected that business customers will also come to appreciate the information (and recognize the experts) the bank is sharing. When the time is right and customers are ready to select a bank (or make a change from their current provider) Northrim will have a leg up on its competition by having this credible source of quality information that demonstrates their understanding of the market. What a better way to build your reputation online!



### About the Author



Eric Cook is a Certified Internet Business Consultant with WSI and has been helping customers better understand and leverage the power of the Internet since 2007 through web development, search optimization, online advertising and proper utilization of social technology. Prior to joining WSI, Cook enjoyed a 15-year career in banking where he was regional president and chief operating officer for a publicly-traded community bank. Pursuing his passion for the Internet and his love of technology, he continues to work with financial service companies and other businesses as their trusted partner to help keep an eye on the future of doing business online.

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