

# BLOG MARKETING: AN INNOVATIVE TOOL IN THE CURRENT DIGITAL ERA

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**Abstract** *Marketing in most developed economies is no longer just about marketing a product or a brand; it is about marketing a feeling, and having the customer experience for the product or a brand. Now days, customers are armed with iPods, TiVo machines, Blackberries, search engines, broadband connections, spam filters, and a variety of other digital technologies. As a result, they have gained exceptional control over the media and content. This has also made the marketers' situation critical concerning how to reach to the consumer & the medium through which a product is to be marketed. Traditional market research such as surveys and focus groups are valuable but they are often time-consuming. Blogs, on the other hand, have the ability to identify trends that may take months to gauge using traditional market research methods.*

*This paper is an attempt to explore and discuss blogs within the context of creating this new, more enduring relationship with the customer. It also talks about two companies those opted blog marketing as their strongest weapon after hitting hard in recession & how this blog marketing theory & its practical implication helped them to overcome from that time situation & made them business icons for existing companies.*

**Keywords** *Blog, Blog Marketing, Theory & Practices.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the recent years, marketing strategies have experienced several challenges not only because of day by day increasing number of products and services but also due to the adoption of different marketing tactics by companies to promote them. Customers' interests and preferences have also changed. So, to remain in the competition and to increase profit, companies have started finding out different ways that can help them in the reduction of their expenses. After a lot of discussion and experiments, companies have found that advertising of products and services through internet can be an option through which cost on advertisement which was very high when traditional tools like TV, radio, print and billboards were used, can be reduced to a great extent. According to the [www.internetworldstat.com](http://www.internetworldstat.com), the number of internet users is growing up rapidly. On the basis of the number of internet users, North America holds the first position followed by Australia & Europe. This has helped the internet to act as social media. This social media has opened plenty of opportunities for companies to strengthen themselves by providing not only the information about products and services but also helping them in increasing the communication between customers and company (Weber, 2009). Some examples of social media applications are Facebook, myspace and Wikipedia etc. (Drury, 2008). This social media is categorized into five parts which are emails, blogs, social networks, forum, and bulletin boards. Out of these, blog has emerged as the most effective promotional

marketing tool (Constantinides and Fountain (2008). During various comparative studies on these new promotional marketing tools, blog has emerged as a tool that not only captures the customers' attention but also helps them to engage with the company.

## BLOG

Before creating an understanding about blog marketing, one must understand what a blog is. A blog is fusion of two separate terms — web and log, basically consist of any content, personal or related to the product and services that can be posted and displayed in a reverse chronological order (newest one will always come first on the page). Blogs help to humanize the organization, gain competitive advantage and open up business opportunities (Hearn, G., et.al, 2009 & Jackson, 2010). Well known examples are Microsoft, Sun Microsystems, Nokia and a number of professional service providers. They help to engage and create closer relationship with the customers, employees & other stakeholders (Andersson, et.al, 2008 & Mazurek, 2008). Blogs build awareness and loyalty by engaging the customer in co-creation of expectations and experience. Purchasers of a product can read a blog about a product before buying it, and post comments and engage in discussion about the product; this personal communication helps create an open and trust-based conversation. A blog can be created by an individual for himself or to fulfill the objectives of his company or

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enterprise. There are various types of blogs like personal blogs, occupational blogs and corporate blogs. A personal blog is created only by an individual to reveal his ideas or thoughts whereas an occupational blog is created to provide professional information & training and a corporate blog is created by the different companies to provide information about their existing as well as upcoming products and services. Some other kinds of blogs are social/socialization blogs, political blogs, news/ journalistic blogs, commercial blogs and client support blogs. Blogs were first introduced in the late 90s. Pyra lab was the first company that launched blogger in 1999 which was later taken over by Google in 2003. .

## BLOG AS A MARKETING TOOL

A blog plays an important role for a company because it provides an identity by which the company can be recognized by the customers. It also gives a voice to its product and services. A blog gets comments and noticed by media professionals as well. The importance of blog has increased in recent years to such an extent that it is now considered almost indispensable by a company which is expert in its area or field. A recent study conducted by the American Association of Advertising Agencies also reported that blogs were identified by 20% of the respondents as the form of new media that will show the greatest growth in the coming years. Generally blogs create a community of people who have some virtues in common. They use the blog as a medium to explore more thoughts or opinions on the topic in which they are interested. Blogs have broken geographical limits as well. Also, blogs are cost-effective, easier to implement than most of the other modes of communication. Now, people from all over the world can contribute on an issue. Thus blogs have helped people or companies to adopt a cosmopolitan approach and have a broader outlook. Commercial blogs have also expanded the markets for a company to great extent. New markets and expansion of activities have forced companies to spend more time and money on research and development and to provide quality and customized products in order to cater various needs of diverse group of customers and continue their existence in this competitive era.

## BLOG MARKETING:

Marketing through blogs is called blog marketing. It is a process which helps a company or an organization to expand its business or to provide information about its product or services & also to promote them inside or outside a country's geographical boundaries. There are many companies where employee bloggers attract attention by posting fresh and interesting information that in turn improves the image and reputation of the company (Wright, 2006 & Odden, 2009).

Indian companies like Accenture (India), Cleartrip, Frito-Lay, Gridstone, HCL, Hindustan Unilever, IBM (India), Microsoft (India), Mahindra & Mahindra, Milagrow, Naukri, Infosys, Rediff, TCS, Tata Interactive Systems, Wipro etc. are using blogs for addressing different corporate functionalities (Raja, M., 2010). In order to realize the full potential of blogs, firms must first identify the specific objectives for which its blogs are being created. It is also advisable to establish a performance matrix for each objective to evaluate whether or not blogs are achieving their intended effects. In the other hand, to make blog marketing successful, it is essential to post relevant content in the blog that motivates the readers enough to click on the link.

## BLOG MARKETING IN THREE EASY STEPS

**Get your blog noticed:** To get a blog noticed, the information about the products and services should be displayed in a way that attracts more reader. All efforts should be made on ensuring that whenever a blog appears on the screen, readers can't resist themselves to read it fully. It should also carry all the relevant information a reader is looking for. This helps in generating more traffic to the blog and expands its reach to a larger number of prospective customers. A blog should always remain active blog as must be updated on constant basis because people lose their interest in old stuff and do not visit to outdated sites.

**Make Visitors, Subscribers:** Generally, a blog is visited by anyone who wants to get information/knowledge about its content or by those who are attracted by the blog. The focus should be on converting the visitors into subscribers. This activity will help in strengthening the relationship between the company and customers. Because of this relationship, customer will give its first preference to the company's product and services. If the relationship lasts long, it results into their loyalty towards the brand.

**Open doors for others:** Once visitors become subscribers; the focus should be changed towards others as a company should not stick itself on providing information to only subscribers, company should put its efforts towards making its blog easily accessible so that if any of the subscriber updates a post in his wall, it can be seen by his friends in the same way. So, focus should be upon increasing the number of subscribers first and then on creating new visitors as well. These three steps will make a cycle and the process will again start itself after the third step.

## STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE BLOG MARKETING

**Make a comment on blog:** This strategy becomes successful in gaining attention of a number of visitors only when one

comment on a blog which is associated to the visitors, one wants to interact with. In this way whatever one does like posting a comment, liking a comment and write something in response, can be seen by the visitors to that blog and motivates them to find out what has been said and about the new things that have taken place.

**Post on a forum:** One can find a number of forums on internet which are active. These forums are the groups of the people who always try to put their views on a certain topic as well as try to be in conversations with each other in the group. These groups are followed by other people who sometimes are not the part of the group. First, they try to be the member of these groups and thereafter, be an interactive member of these groups by posting their views on any topic be it social, political or product details of their company. Now, this can be seen by all the group members as well as followers of the group. This activity helps an individual or a company to highlight whatever they want, without spending much money.

**Marketing of articles:** Most of the time it is seen that posts related to a company's product details or personal views are very descriptive and take much time to read. Through the technique of marketing of articles, a post is segregated into small articles and then posted one by one with an attractive headline. This makes reading interesting as well as increases traffic on the blog.

**Posting by guest:** This is also a powerful tool as it helps a blog to grow an author's platform that as a persona. In most of the blogs it can be seen that instructions for posting content are given. Now the load of the traffic to the blog depends upon how efficiently one posts relevant information keeping the instructions in mind. People post on this platform as guests.

**Continuous Posting:** It has been observed that people do not like to revisit the blog which are inactive or less interactive. So, one should update the blogs on regular intervals in order to keep them fresh and interesting.

## **MERITS & DEMERITS OF BLOG MARKETING:**

Although blog marketing has established itself as an important marketing tool in recent years, it has some advantages as well as disadvantages. Blog marketing is a low cost strategy which means that now content can reach to the customers by spending very less amount of money contrary to a very high cost involved in traditional marketing. It also provides great exposure to the company. It helps in creating a community of people who have some virtues in common with respect to the blog i.e. regular reading and giving reactions. Whenever a relevant content is uploaded in the blog, it starts helping

in SEO (search engine optimization) which leads to more traffic to the site. However, there are disadvantages too. It takes time to first create a relevant content and then to upload it and then to wait for readers' response. If reader finds it appropriate enough to tell about the product or services characteristics only then he will respond to it otherwise it will become not more than a spam for him. Any company can create a blog for itself but it requires regular updating. Blogs made for the company, need very skilled people who have not only very good knowledge about the products and services but also have expertise about how and what to write in the blog. It is seen very often that due to mistakes of some unskilled people, a company loses its name and fame.

## **CASE STUDY**

Here are two cases of two distinct companies which deal in different products. It is a modest attempt to realize how blog or Content marketing can transform a business into a runaway success story.

### **SHERIDAN'S FIBERGLASS SWIMMING POOL CONSTRUCTION COMPANY**

#### **History and Background of the Company**

Here is a case about a Company that used content marketing or blog marketing as its biggest weapon to fight with recession. Marcus Sheridan started this company which deals in fiberglass swimming pool construction in the Virginia/Maryland area of the US with one of his partner in 2001. Their customers were mainly small to medium-sized companies, marketers, and business owners. This company established itself in a very short span and earned a huge number of customers by 2008.

#### **Sheridan's Pool Company Blog**

This company also wasn't remained untouched in the recession phase of 2008 like others. This recession left no other option to company's owner to save it except being creative as well as innovative. When company found itself in a situation where it almost became difficult to survive, company's head & some of his loyal employees sat together to find out the most prominent strategy that could save company's image as well as help them in retaining its customers. So, they decided to go for blogging. They started blogging by giving answers to its customers' questions.

## Implementation of Blog Marketing Theory and Practices

As Content or blog marketing revolves around the concept of “They (Customers) ask, you answer”. The owner developed this thought on an open portal named Twitter and started answering questions raised by small to medium-sized companies, marketers, and business owners who wanted to get information about how to start or where to invest money into a business of constructing fiberglass swimming pool. Initially it was slow but after some time it spreads in the way like it made owner, an instructor. Now suggestions regarding how to develop a business, how to market a product, how to be ethical while using marketing practices, were also started providing. Suggestions were given in the form of either blog or e-book (a blog combined with five or more other blogs) or podcast. These all things are intricately connected. The owner who adopted this kind of marketing & takes it at its maximum probable height is being known worldwide as “pool guy turned marketing guy.”

## TOPSHOP WOMENWEAR FASHION RETAIL CHAIN

### History and Background of the Company

With over 200 stores across the UK and an average of 250,000 weekly shoppers to its Oxford Circus flagship store, Topshop, a multi-billion pound womenswear fashion retail chain, has many competitive advantages in the traditional High Street distribution channel setting. Catering to its cult following of fashion-conscious consumers and industry insiders, they pave the way for up-to-the-minute affordable style. The company recognizes that these competitive advantages of the physical Topshop store presence do not directly transfer onto the Internet sphere, and consequently have been building their online brand strategy to develop a suitable approach to competitive advantage and achieving value from the Internet. The long-established Topshop online store (<http://www.topshop.com>) attracts 1.9 million unique users per week (Arcadia Group Limited, 2012).

The Topshop target market is primarily focused on 15-30 year-old women, however the brand internally targets everyone who loves fashion, regardless of income or age (The Guardian, 2002). The Topshop brand affirms that it is a “fashion innovation of the 21st Century” and targets its customer by selling the latest fashion products at affordable prices, as well as tailoring the rest of its marketing mix (popularly termed the 4 P’s) to suit their needs and distinguish from competitors.

## The Topshop Blog:

Almost every company has to rethink its strategies due to the changes that the Internet brings. Topshop have embraced the digital age and actively engage in the use of social network marketing tools to interact with their customers through their Twitter and Facebook accounts, as well as their award-winning blog, Inside-Out (<http://insideout.topshop.com>). Topshop recognize that consumers are becoming increasingly fashion conscious and are striving to keep up-to-date with the latest, ever-changing fashion styles. This recognition has been translated into a marketing tool in the form of Inside-Out, the frequently updated Topshop blog which has been carefully strategized to discuss (and encourage discussion around) the latest trends in fashion in a subtly synchronised commercial medium. A snapshot of the Inside-Out blog homepage is shown below for illustrative purposes. Inside-Out’s homepage layout follows generic blog format. The name is in the header, the posts are listed in chronological order and there is presence of a functional sidebar consisting of a blog descriptor, search function, categories and archives of blog entries and a blog roll containing links to blogs of similar interest. Additionally, the header features an external hyperlink to the Topshop online store and hyperlinks to alternative Topshop social networking sites are featured in the sidebar, along with a contact e-mail address. The blog entries differ in content and include: daily Topshop musings on style and culture; diary segments and interviews of Topshop HQ staff; press features and detailing of inside-industry-news; upcoming Topshop collection previews; and guidance on how to wear new trends.

## Implementation of Blog Marketing Theory and Practices:

The wrong strategic decisions surrounding the investment of the functional corporate blog could materialize as a major strategic risk for Topshop. Organizations often get it wrong due to flaws in the planned marketing approaches or poor execution of planned approaches (Chaffey, 2009).

Based upon the discussed overview of Topshop’s marketing strategy, it could be assumed that the Topshop target market of highly fashion-conscious women should remain loyal customers should Topshop maintain their reputation for being fashionable. In terms of the content of blog entries and communication employed, the posts appear to convey varying brand building approaches with emphasis on fashion knowledge and execution: entries of a personal nature and diary-like entries provide readers with a voyeuristic insight into how the company runs; entries mentioning exclusive industry content, name-dropping fashion industry higher-uppers or Topshop’s notoriety within the

industry are conveying Topshop's brand achievements and strengthening their image in the mind of their fashion-savvy target consumer; and entries including Topshop merchandise directly or generating style how-to ideas based around Topshop merchandise are cleverly influencing the purchasing decisions of the reader. Furthermore, their social networking presence gives the impression of relationship building and community creation. This combined with the authoritative and exclusive fashion industry knowledge could be considered as a unique selling point for the brand as it is probable for the customer to perceive this as both interpersonal and authoritative and thus, both trusted and admired.

Additionally, in relation to the observation of the Topshop Inside-Out blog, it covers an assessment of the company's use of the functional blogging tool for the purpose of e-marketing, specifically focused on customer relationship management in correlation with the Six I's of digital marketing (McDonald and Wilson, 1999).

## ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

The relation of theory to the functional practice suggests that Sheridan's company & Topshop, both are utilizing their blog as an effective customer relationship management tool, with emphasis on customer interactivity, whilst encouraging individualization to a small degree.

One risk identified in the assessment of blogging theory in relation to the corporate blog as a relationship management and marketing tool was that, the high level of interactivity encouragement could potentially cause critical implications to the brand's image or the credibility of the blog content itself.

As a whole, using this basic assessment as a basis, it could be concluded that both the companies have strategically implemented Inside-Out and maintained it as a successful relationship management and brand building tool for acquiring, retaining and extending customer interest towards their products. The blog content has a distinctive style that balances the interest of the reader/customer with the commercial interests of the business organization. Fundamentally, their approach to corporate blogging is understated yet efficient in value creation in the context of brand image building and customer relationship management.

## CONCLUSION

In the recent years, marketing strategies have experienced numerous challenges as business world has become more competitive than ever. With the increased use of internet all over the world, blogs have emerged as a platform where

many people exchange their views and opinion on something of common interest. This has also drawn the attention of marketers of all over the world who have started using it as a tool for marketing their products and services. This has made blogs a very attractive option for the customers. A blog plays an important role for a company by giving a voice to its product and services. With the use of blog as marketing tool, companies have become able to expand their markets to a greater extent than ever before and also providing information regarding current as well as upcoming products and services. This has also helped customers to find more competitive and customized products at reasonable prices. However, blog marketing also faces many challenges which must be addressed in order to embark upon a successful marketing plan. The challenge in blog marketing is not only to create new visitors but also to retain existing visitors by converting them into subscribers and finally into loyal customers for company's products and services. It also must be kept in mind that a blog is not a substitute for traditional marketing tools but only a complementary tool which can help a company to enhance its sales.

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