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## **Demand Generation Through Corporate Blogging:**

### **What is Blogging's Role in Search Engine Optimization & the Social Networking Phenomenon?**

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## Summary

There are two significant online trends that directly impact the present and the future of Business-to-Business Marketing.

The first trend is the rising importance of search engines as the initial starting point on the web. According to Piper Jaffrey, 44% of all web visits begin with a search as opposed to a specific URL or destination. And search will continue to grow as the most significant channel in new customer awareness and acquisition.

The second trend is a move towards socially oriented marketing. As the buzz continues to grow around new media such as mySpace, Facebook and blogging, marketers are asking: "What role does social media play in *my* marketing strategy?"

In this whitepaper, we will explain how an inexpensive and easy-to-execute strategy centered upon organizational blogging can dramatically impact search engine results and serve as an entry into the world of social media – which is a world that facilitates a significant increase in web engagement and conversions.

## Section One: Blogging for Search

Although most blogging to-date has been focused on technology, politics, or other forms of *Citizen Journalism*, interest among corporations and other organizations is quickly growing. Translating that interest into an actionable plan is where most organizations struggle. In other words, they know they want to blog, but they aren't entirely sure of the why, what, and how. Why should they blog? What are the benefits? And how can it be measured?

To understand the true value of a corporate blogging strategy, it's critical to first understand the value of organic (*or natural*) search. Back in July 2007, Seth Godin had an interesting and relevant blurb called: *Permission, Junk and Spam*. He pointed out that the biggest change in marketing since he penned *Permission Marketing* in 1999 is the **idea and ubiquity of search marketing**.

Godin's general premise is that with search, people are *not* being interrupted with junk (*stuff they are not interested in right now*). Instead, they search when they are interested. Here's a key quote: "*The result of Google and the prevalence of search means that people are far more forgiving of things that need to be sought out, and less patient than ever with selfish marketers that insist on showing up in your face.*"

The key to success in marketing today and marketing in the future is that you need to be found on the search engines. To date, the easiest way to get found has been by way of Pay Per Click (PPC) keyword advertising. However, in the Marketing Sherpa Search Benchmark Study for 2008, PPC was rated 4th on a list of high ROI marketing tactics. The most telling quote is below:

**"To say that 99 people out of 100 click on the natural search results is probably an underestimate."**

Compound that remarkable conversion advantage with keyword price inflation, and it doesn't take much to come to the conclusion that the strongest acquisition strategy in a marketer's arsenal is high rankings in organic search.

## Search is the most democratic of all acquisition methods.

In fact, 44% of all web interactions begin with search. And while billions are spent on PPC and other ad-centric strategies, nearly all of the clicks on a search results page come from an organic area.

In this section, we will cover the factors in successful organic optimization and why organizational blogging needs to be considered as a core tactic for search engine optimization (SEO).

In the figure below, we see a Business to Business search on “email marketing best practices.” In this search, the top two organic search results are for an ExactTarget corporate blog titled “Email Marketing Best Practices.” ExactTarget also has a Pay Per Click ad appearing on the right side, hidden among a number of competitors.

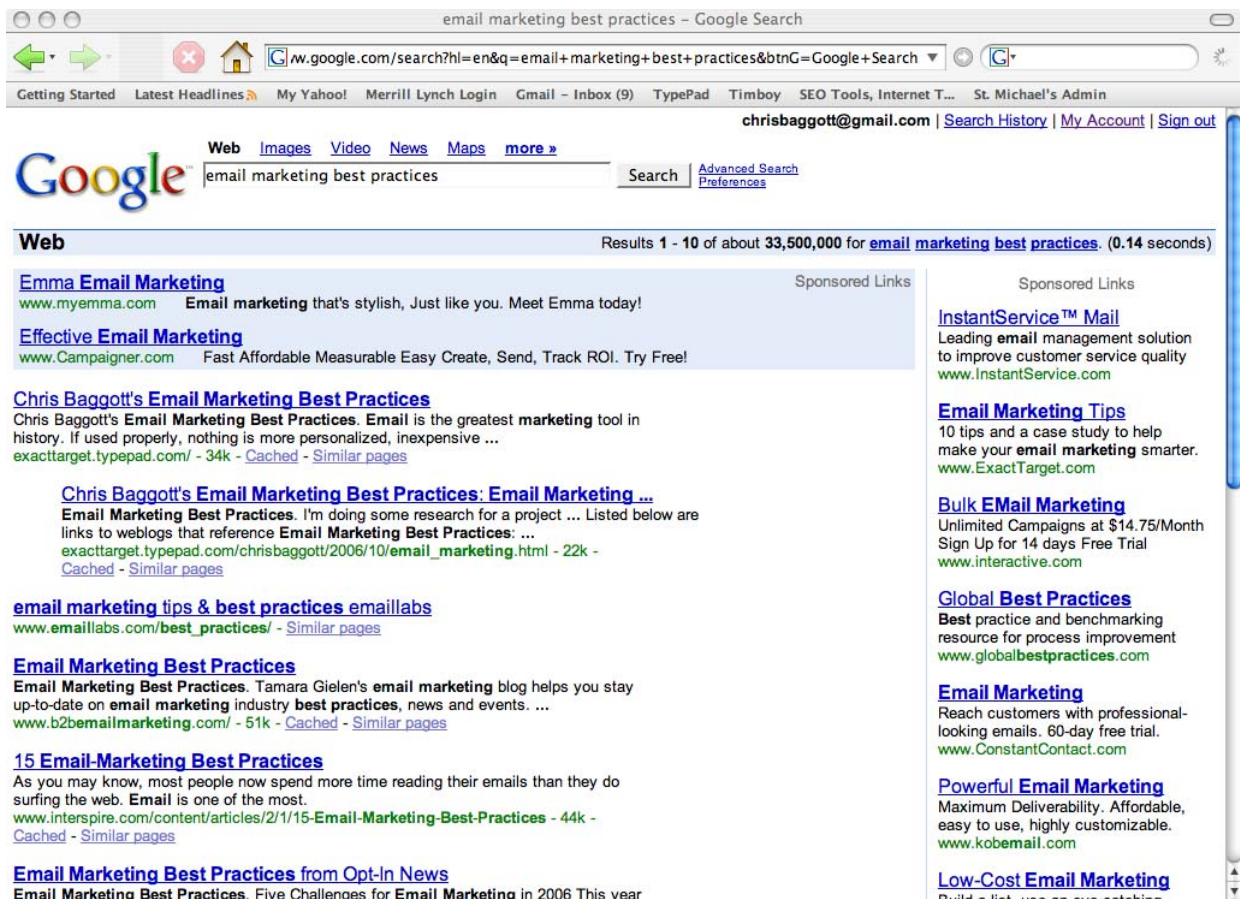


Figure: Organic and PPC results for ExactTarget

The interesting part is that the blog converts at a rate nearly a hundred times the PPC ad. Why is this the case?

Why do blogs do so well in the organic search rankings?

There are a few key factors:

#### Factor: Page Titles

To quote SEO expert Steven Bradley: “By far the most important piece of writing you’ll do on any given page is your page title. Search engines consider your page title to be very indicative of what can be found on the page.”

Yes, it sounds obvious! The problem is that in traditional website strategy, you are dealing with a finite number of pages, which creates two problems.

1. You have a limited number of keyword phrases to target, so you often default to the most mainstream/competitive keyword titles.
2. The marketer often doesn't have control of the title.

Blogs, on the other hand, don't suffer from this limitation. Think about your keyword strategy for PPC and use that as a guide for your blog titles. For example, if ExactTarget wants to rank well on the search term "blogging best practices," they should name a blog this. And by "name," I mean that they should title it "blogging best practices." Titling by the appropriate keyword phrase is a highly scalable strategy, meaning that ultimately, you would have a blog titled with every one of your PPC keywords.

Along those lines, here are some tips:

- When writing page titles, place your keywords as close to the front of the title as you can.
- Don't "stuff" with keywords. Titles still need to be readable and need to convince someone to click on them, even in the organic results. (Remember, it's the actual page title that will show as your result and link in the search results. Obviously results that include the search terms that the searcher has used will be the most compelling ones!).
- Be wary of using titles such as "*Rob's Ramblings*." Every blog should have a meaningful title that includes specific keyword phrases for which you want to rank.

### **Factor: Keywords**

The titles of your organization's webpages is not the only place where keywords play a huge role. Search engines also love finding keywords within your content. The challenge is maintaining a "healthy range," which simply means that the page is dense enough with keywords that it's easy to identify it as relevant to the search at hand, but not **so dense** with keywords that it looks like you are writing a bunch of junk. That's why keyword density is an area where more is not necessarily better. It comes down to the ratio of keywords to overall content.

Blogs have a significant advantage with respect to keywords because, by nature, they are comprised of a lot of words. On the other hand, a regular website page has a finite amount of room for written content. But with blogs, the content will continue to grow over time, which translates into thousands of words, and thousands of keyword phrases. The sheer volume maintains that all important "healthy range."

By initiating an organization-wide blogging strategy, you will naturally introduce a lot of content contributors. Not only does this increase the overall amount of content that your organization is able to generate, but also the variations on the keyword phrases you are trying to rank on in organic search.

It's important to accept the fact that you, as a marketer, cannot control how a searcher will describe his or her problem or need. In fact, it's a lot like the game Pictionary. The guy who has been tasked with drawing the word "jumping" can't understand why his team can't figure out that his picture is the perfect rendition of the word. I'd venture to say that if you had ten people trying to draw the same word, you would wind up with at least seven variations of the same thing.

The prospective customers searching for your business online are a lot like the team members trying to guess the Pictionary word – and your best bet for winning is by casting a wide net with lots of keywords and lots of content. The more content and the more keywords, the more chances for there to be a "match" when they look for you.

## Factor: Links

I won't get into too much detail regarding how the search engines work or link value. But it's important to understand the role and value of inbound links with respect to organic search engine optimization. Generally, there are two important areas of this subject: link volume and link quality. Both can have an impact on search engine optimization.

There is no question that having more links pointing to your blogs is better than fewer links. You may be wondering you can have too many, and the short answer is no. However, there are other considerations.

Google in particular considers the *value* of the link more so than the quantity of them. How is "value" determined? Good question. It's a closely guarded secret, but there are at least three considerations:

- Credibility of the site linking to you. The higher the credibility, the more value to you. "Credible" sites are those considered experts by factors such as their own links, the size and age of the site, and some experts even venture to say that a domain with a .gov, .edu and .org have higher value than a typical .com.
- Another consideration in the calculation of value is the number of outbound links a given site has in addition to the links that point to you. You can think about it as a *judicious* screen. If it appears a site has too many outbound links, it can deflate the value of the link.
- The **age** of the links matter as well. It makes sense that a link from a site that has been around for a few years is perceived as more valuable than a site that went up yesterday.

When comparing corporate blogging and a corporate website with respect to a linking strategy, in very simple terms, external sites are more likely to link to blogs that cover a specific topic than they are willing to link to a strictly commercial site.

What are some ways to generate inbound links? Participating in the dialog is a great way to get started. Find the areas where people are already blogging on topics that pertain to you, and link to them. Write honest, non-commercial comments with links pointing back to your blogs. It's important to remember a great Ben Stein quote: *"The number one way to get people to do what you want is to....ask them."*

Don't be shy about asking everyone to link to your corporate blogs. Great success can be had from linking among associations, educational institutions and other non-profits. A successful local linking strategy can be accomplished through sponsorships of local schools and events. If your community is at all like mine, you have probably seen booster clubs that seek business money in exchange for an ad or banner on a calendar, book, or similar item. Instead, it is worth asking for a link on their site as it will provide a lot more value (*and the traffic sent from it is all trackable*).

Keep in mind that the sites that link to you will need to be indexed in order for you to get any value. If the search engines can't see a site that's pointing to you, they can't see that the site is pointing anywhere at all.

Generally, organizations should think of linking importance beyond the benefits of search engine optimization and also focus on the more direct and tangible benefit of **conversion**. To quote Eric Ward, the link expert, "Many people look at developing links to their site as a way to improve 'link popularity' for better search engine ranking. But they overlook the traffic that such links can bring to a site on their own. Linking strategies serve a dual function for significant traffic in their own right as well as improving search engine rankings."

In other words, people will actually click on links pointing to your blogs. Links drive visitors who are interested in what you have to say and what you do—which can be well qualified leads.

All in all, links help drive traffic in a number of ways and are a critical component to any corporate blogging strategy.

**Factor: Age**

Spam sites come and go – but trust is built by the search engines over time. When it comes to ranking well in the search engines, older is better. A typical corporate site probably has content removed and replaced on a regular basis, but the chronological nature of blog content means that you are building upon content rather than erasing it. And guess what? That old content has value.

**Factor: Recency & Frequency**

In addition to the age of a site, search engines also take the recency and frequency of new content into consideration. Building content takes time, and that commitment reflects an interest to the search engine that is rewarded. Recency is a term that relates to how recently the site has been updated. All things being equal, the more recently updated site gets the advantage. Frequency is simply how often the site is updated. And the very nature of corporate blogging means that content will be added frequently, which reflects well for the search engines.

**Factor: Specificity**

Focus is rewarded by the search engines, meaning that keeping your content on topic can build authority for your blogs. One great advantage of letting several people within your organization contribute to corporate blogs is that you will be generating a significant amount of content on various topics related to your business. Channeling that content into several narrowly focused blogs can impact search engine optimization across a large number of category-specific keywords.

**Conclusion**

Blogging is naturally conducive to great search engine optimization. There are no tricks or games: the search engines set the rules. They rank blogs well because blogs follow the guidelines of what they are looking for and consider valuable to searchers. The key for the organization considering a corporate blogging strategy is to find tools that enable them to empower and control employees and other constituents in order to create content through blogging; and at the same time, organize that content to the best benefit of the organization.

## Section Two: Blogging's Role in Social Networking and Engagement

You know how a comprehensive corporate blogging strategy can impact the most important phase of customer acquisition by impacting the organic search.

But what happens then? Obviously, top of the funnel traffic is nice, but if it doesn't convert -- what good is it? (*Note: I would not consider an acceptable answer to be "better brand awareness."*)

What separates corporate blogging from citizen journalism is the demand for conversion. As organizations, we want to see measurable results from any marketing tools.

And like any other web media (*email marketing, traditional website*) corporate blogging is completely measurable. What a lot of people forget is that it's also configurable. How should a blog look? Well, that's up to you and what your data tells you. The point is: other than the areas discussed above, there can be very little difference between a blog and any other great site.

The core difference between a blog and most websites is not the look and feel, but rather the social aspect. If you visit Wikipedia and look for the definition of the word "social," you will see that there is no agreement as to what that term actually means.

What you *will* see is that the most consistent definitions include the concepts around the relationships of people.

And here is the big thing with blogging and business: **people like people**. People buy from people. This is a concept that comes as a shock to many marketers. It's almost as if we have all been so corrupted by the reach and frequency of mass marketing tactics, that over the past 50 years we have forgotten about people.

To be fair, mass and brand-based marketing worked for a lot of companies during that timeframe. Additionally, there weren't many tools available to bring actual human beings into the mix on a large scale.

If all that marketers have access to are paper or broadcast tools, we are forced to use them. As the web evolved over the past ten years, most of us took the same mindset and tactics that worked for the old mediums and simply applied them to new mediums...never once thinking that a new medium would enable us to reach for more sophisticated tactics (*or perhaps less sophisticated, but more effective*).

What's interesting is that the people still began to gravitate toward what they liked – and **people** who were like them. This is the rise of the social networking phenomenon. The people on the web are seeking out and affiliating with people whom they perceive to be similar to them.

Mark Penn is the gentleman who first coined the term "soccer mom" and has a great new book, *Microtrends*. The key point of *Microtrends* is that the country is becoming fragmented into smaller and smaller segments. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does a lot to explain the rise in business blogging and other adoptions of social networking by organizations.

People want to affiliate with people who are like themselves, and *Microtrends* breaks down society into 75 reasonable categories ranging from "left-handers" to "successful women who stay single" to "pet parents."

The challenge for marketers within this environment is to connect with these disparate groups on a human-to-human level as opposed to the traditional institution-to-many approach.

The opportunity is that you have these *Microtrends* segments in your organization. A comprehensive corporate blogging strategy can give them a voice.

Many marketers think that this social networking phenomenon is something new. The reality is that it's always been here, it's just been on hiatus for the past few decades while we were seduced by the ease and power of mass marketing tactics.

I'm reminded of a quote by the sales and marketing Zig Ziglar nearly 60 years ago: *"If you go looking for a friend, you're going to find they're very scarce. If you go out to be a friend, you'll find them everywhere."*

The genius of Zig is that he is as relevant now as he was back in the 50's. With organizational or corporate blogging you have an opportunity to *"be a friend."*

When people go out to the web, they are looking for answers – especially in the early stage of the buying process, which is all about people finding people who will give them risk-free information.

Chris Anderson, author of *The Long Tail* recently posted an interesting thought on his blog:

*"Right now the world is focused on stand-alone social networking sites, especially Facebook and MySpace, and the fad of the moment is to take brands and services there, as companies build Facebook apps and MySpace pages in a bid to follow the audience wherever they happen to be. But at the same time there's a growing sense that elements of social networking is something all good sites should have, not just dedicated social networks. And that suggests a very different strategy--social networking as a feature, not a destination."*

A typical website isn't about people, it's about the institution. With company blogs, you have the ability to expose your people...and the ones who are passionate about what they are doing and the role that they play within the organization. Encourage as many people within your organization to blog, and you will automatically wrap an honest human face around your corporate presence. And at the same time, it will fulfill your customers' and prospects' desire for a social connection.

People will continue to look for answers to their problems and needs by typing a keyword phrase into a search engine – and they will continue to have the choice of picking a result from 5,000,000 others, all of which blandly say that they are "the best." Or by the same token, they can see a result from a corporate blog, and upon clicking through to it, find that's written by a real person, perhaps with his or her picture and contact information, and that it talks *(in a conversational and informal way)* about exactly how they think about that specific issue.

This is exactly how an organization can follow Zig's advice: **go out and be a friend.**

Forget wondering if you should participate in Second Life or such. Instead, empower your employees to participate in your corporate blogs. Your odds that your customers and prospects finding someone like themselves increases dramatically...as will your overall business success.

### **About Compendium Blogware**

Compendium Blogware is an Indianapolis-based company that makes the benefits of blogging more accessible to organizations, publishers, and individuals through its proprietary platform. Co-founded by Chris Baggott, whose blog was voted "Best Online Marketing Blog" by *MarketingSherpa* readers and "Best of the Web" by *Forbes*, and Ali Sales, Compendium's mission is to simplify blogging for the masses. More information can be found at [www.compendiumblogware.com](http://www.compendiumblogware.com).