



We are always looking for better, more effective ways to communicate with people we want to hear our messages. With instant access to information on the Internet, are there emerging channels of electronic communication available to convey your messages? According to this month's guest columnist, J. Dean Foster, the answer to this question is a resounding "yes." His Tip Sheet in this month's issue provides ideas on the use of blogs to communicate your messages. Are blogs over-valued? Can they work in the water/wastewater industry? Read on to learn the answers to these and other questions about blogs.



By J. Dean Foster

PE Tip Sheet No. 32:

Blog On— Should You Join the Conversation?

That Buzzing Sound

There is a definite buzz, some say a booming sound, emanating from your Web connection: the buzz of blogs.

Oh, great, you say. As if it weren't hard enough to figure out the Web and gather the right equipment and software over the past decade. Now, we've got to learn about something called a blog. Even your computer doesn't recognize it as a word—keeps giving it a red underline.

What is this thing called blog, and what are we going to do with it? Is it a buzz, a boom, a bubble ready to burst—or a fundamental change in the way we communicate?

Here's the rub: To date, blog search engines now track more than 47 million blogs worldwide. Just another in a series of Web-inspired, mind-numbing statistics that you may have heard: The blogosphere (yes, this word is redlined, too) is doubling in size every six months and is more than six times larger than it was three years ago. On average, a new blog is created every second.

By the time you finish reading this article, we will welcome 2,100 new baby blogs to the world. Happy birthday, blogo.

With numbers like these, it's not surprising that the blog buzz continues. Consider this: Amazon.com reveals 187 results for books on blogs; *Business Week* declared in 2006 that "Blogs Will Change Your Business;" Time Warner paid \$25 million for Weblogs, Inc., a network of blogging sites; and News Corp. followed that up with a \$530 million purchase of MySpace.

What does all this mean? That depends on whom you ask. Skeptics say blogs are over-valued, over-hyped, and are due for a dot-com-like meltdown. Others are convinced

that, regardless of whether blogs make money for big business, there's a fundamental shift going on.

The only question is, do you join the conversation?

What and How?

Let's first discuss what a blog is not. A blog has nothing to do with the 1952 Steve McQueen sci-fi thriller, "The Blob."

History does not name the genius who coined the phrase. Blog is simply Web/logs merged: "We-Blog"—get it? A blog is an interactive way to share information on the Web and allow other people to post comments on what you write. It's like a timely personal journal that you write about your work, career, hobby, news of the day—any topic imaginable.

Most successful bloggers update their blog each day or several times a day. This experience turns anyone into a micro-publisher, a self-appointed journalist, expert, or chronicler of a given topic. But unlike mainstream media, blogs thrive on posting links to other sites of interest—even other blogs that cover the same topic. This means the audience of one blog has access to a wide range of opinions and styles.

There are two ways to set up a blog; one is free, the other is not. Many services host blogs at no cost, including Blogger, a Google-owned company; Bloglines (AskJeeves); and LiveJournal (SixApart). Typically, hosting is free and other services are available for a monthly fee. The other format involves installing an RSS feed on your existing Web site, which allows instant comment posting from an audience. This approach also helps promote your Web site and increase traffic.

Finding a Fit

Personal blogs are a separate matter. Let's take a serious look at how blogs could fit into your water/wastewater utility operations. First, do not jump on the blog train unless you know where you're going. Clearly, there are a host of questions and approvals to be gathered. Cultivate a sense of how the blog could help your utility's communication program. Create a blog plan with these parameters:

- ◆ Access research that shows a section of public may not be getting your utility's messages.
- ◆ Show how a blog would reach this audience.
- ◆ Craft a writing style, or voice, to appeal to the audience.
- ◆ Create an overview of message topics; write three sample blogs without posting them to the Web.
- ◆ Create a promotional plan to draw the audience to the blog.
- ◆ Brand the blog with a key utility brand message.
- ◆ Create an internal communication plan to draw message ideas from different departments.
- ◆ Create an evaluation method to chart the effectiveness of the blog. A series of focus groups would help develop the blog, and numbers from audience visits would define impression counts.

Package this material together and do three things:

- ◆ Get your supervisor's input and approval.
- ◆ Get your general manager's input and approval.
- ◆ Get input and approval from elected commissioners or officials of the utility.

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How Utilities Could Benefit from Blogs

There is no substitute for direct, two-way communication. Essentially, utilities could use blogs as a daily, immediate customer news forum. Information could explore a variety of the following topics. Please note that many utilities already post such information on their Web sites, although it is not in a blog format that allows customer interaction.

- ◆ **Engineering/Project Management**—Construction project updates, especially those that involve destruction of trees or traffic tie-ups along heavily traveled roads.
- ◆ **Customer Service**—Questions about bills, water line leaks, home water audits performed by customers, electronic bill pay promotion.
- ◆ **Value of Water**—Cost comparisons to buying bottled water, protecting water resources, rates, and asset management.
- ◆ **Health**—Water's important role in human health, health tips for consumption, kids' health.
- ◆ **General Manager**—Public affairs issues and the utility's leadership role, planning, the utility's role in society.
- ◆ **Water Quality**—Details beyond the annual WQ report, updates from the lab.
- ◆ **Conservation Tips**—Drought communication updates, encouragement for customers to share their own tactics.
- ◆ **IT Department**—Online bill presentment, bill pay options.

Water/Wastewater Industry Blogs

Welcome to the vastness of deep space where nothing much is happening. To be honest, it takes a while to find active blogs dealing with our industry. This is wide-open territory for someone who wants to go pioneering. There are a few; check out these sites:

- ◆ www.hsdll.org – Sponsored by our very own AWWA as a resource blog for utilities to help utilities after disasters strike.
- ◆ www.waterandwastewater.com – Part of an industry buyer's marketplace site. This blog covers an enormous amount of material and carries a directory (as discussed earlier) to thousands of equipment suppliers and utilities. The site also features an interactive "Ask Tom" section, as well as guest bloggers.
- ◆ www.ruralwater.org – Another good use of an organizational site to keep members posted on news and events.
- ◆ www.portlandonline.com – Without question, this is the best blog site in our industry right now. It is managed by the Portland (Oregon) Water Bureau (see the following excerpt).

David Shaff, administrator of the Portland Water Bureau, offers a great example of how blogs can be effective by using an open, honest voice to make his blog readable, witty, and ultimately, memorable. The following is an excerpt posted by Shaff (www.portlandonline.com) on February 16, 2007, in response to a water shutdown for maintenance that left 180 residents without water for 16 hours.

He aptly titled the blog "Santa Didn't Leave You No Pony."

"... one conversation I had explains the title of this dispatch. A gentleman who lives in the shutdown area called me and admitted to being inconvenienced slightly, then remarked that when you think about the situation in Iraq and other parts of the world where interruption of ANY water is a regular occurrence, his inconvenience didn't seem so bad. He said 'Stuff doesn't last forever, and you never know what you're going to find.'

"I told him one of our favorite sayings is that digging in Portland is like Christmas every day; you never know what surprises you'll find.

"His response? 'Santa didn't leave you no pony.'

"Well, we may not have gotten a pony but we learned a lot about communication, planning and customer service...."

Giddy Up

I would like to encourage you to start your own blog for your utility, using the points outlined here. But remember that this is a non-traditional media where old school dies a thousand times and humor, paired with an intuitive sense of your audience, rules the day. You'll need to find your voice. You'll need to negotiate some leeway from your superiors.

After all, you will likely be reaching other young professionals who simply won't respond to traditional media or forms of communication. That's right, GenY (15-to-35-year-old baby boom offspring) are a tough-to-reach, cynical bunch. But you may know that already. Yours is the first generation to interact with technology since birth. You are Early Adopters (pioneers) of new products and ideas. You are digitally savvy and far less brand loyal than other generations. You put your trust in the reported experience of others rather than corporate speak. Yankelovich Research, the nation's leading consumer research firm, outlines your generation this way:

- ◆ 60 percent have a negative opinion of advertising and traditional media.
- ◆ 70 percent tune out advertising/traditional media.
- ◆ A vast majority finds online communication to be a positive form of networking, communicating ideas, and self-expression.
- ◆ Most view marketing communication as either a brand attribute or brand turn-off.

GenY 2037

GenY is the future of our customer base. This means that blogs offer an excellent way to reach an important group of customers, specifically younger and newer customers who do not buy into the old ways of doing things. In fact, we can either help our utility brand or hurt our brand with GenY, simply by the methods we use to communicate.

I encourage you to explore the blogosphere (there's that red line again). And remember that since you began reading this article, there are 2,100 new blogs out in cyberspace. Be clever about what you say and how you say it; there's a lot of noise with this buzz.

So get to work: Research, plan, promote, evaluate. Be relevant—and blog on.

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