

Entering the blogosphere

How blogging can help you connect with your customers **Interviewed by Sue Ostrowski**

If you're looking for a way to directly connect with your customers, blogging may be the answer.

And if you think that as a business leader, you're too busy to find time to blog, you're wrong, says Michael Willner, who writes his own blog about technology as the CEO of Insight Communications.

"Carve out 30 to 60 minutes early in the day to get it out," Willner says. "You can also respond to e-mails during that time and to customers commenting on something you wrote on your blog. In this day and age, if you really want to communicate with anyone born after 1970, it's probably a good use of a CEO's time."

And once people are reading your blog and you've established yourself as a thought leader, they'll become familiar with your Web site and think of you when they need the products or services that you offer.

Smart Business spoke with Willner about how to get started blogging and how to use your blog to connect with your customers and get feedback on your products.

What advice would you give a CEO who's never blogged before and wants to get started?

Get someone to help you. If you learned how to be a CEO, you can certainly learn how to do this. It's helpful to have someone who understands the technology. But even at a small company, if you employ anyone under the age of 30, you probably have someone on site that can help you set up a blog. And most companies have someone who is involved in IT and is aware of the ways that people can easily start to blog.

Also, there are a number of services that host blogs, and they do it at a phenomenally low price — an almost insignificant price — and make it really easy to set up so that you can post on the blog every hour of every day if you want to. It helps to have someone who is aware of the technical tricks of the trade, but even a small local business could do it.

I would encourage every CEO to do this, and if it seems even the slightest bit overwhelming, use someone to help you get started. Once you get the feel of it, it will become very easy to do; it's certainly easier than managing a staff of people, which every CEO has to do.

The harder part is making sure that



Michael Willner
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you have the right content going to the people who you're trying to reach.

How do you determine the content of your blog?

Peruse the Internet, read newspapers and make a determination of what might be of interest to your customers. Most companies will have a very selective group of customers that they're blogging for, and you need to find subjects that are of interest to them. Some of it is reporting on things you've seen, or you can link to other sites so that people come to view your blog as a gathering site for things that interest them. You also don't want it to be commercial, although you can sometimes get in a couple licks about your service versus that of your competitors if it's pertinent to the subject that you're writing about.

How do you attract people to your blog?

You do marketing, you run online banner ads in places where people who would be interested in what you're writing about might already be surfing the Web. You can buy banner ads that are specific to the geographical locations where you have services so that your customers are seeing it and put informa-

tion on your own Web site that directs people to your blog. There are multiple ways of doing it but most of it is online.

The goal is to attract people who are interested enough to keep coming back, not just driving one-time hits to your site. To keep people coming back, some blogs are updated multiple times a day, but others update only once or twice a week.

How can blogging help you interact with your customers and build relationships?

You need to allow comments on your blog and limit rules and regulations. For example, the only rule we have is that if a customer has an individual service issue and they post it, we will pull it down and contact them and see what we can do for them. We'll also take down any off-color comments.

But you shouldn't delete comments just because they are unfavorable. If it's pertinent to what you've written about, you should leave it up. If someone is just taking a potshot at you or at anyone else that has nothing to do with the story they're commenting on, then it's OK to take that down because it's not pertinent — not because it's negative.

You can learn a lot about your product this way. It's an unfiltered view of what your customers think about you. It's also a terrific way for CEOs to find out what their customers think and it can be very helpful in the product development part of your business. <<

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