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Corporate Blogging: Best Practices in Russia and Abroad

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Abstract

This paper considers corporate blogging as an effective promotion tool. The authors give a review of several largest Western and Russian companies and their successful blogging experience. They come up with the key traits of blogs that differently attract Russian and international readers.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade the business world has seen the rapid development of corporate blogs, which are particularly popular in the West. Those companies that have realized the effectiveness of blogging as an up-to-date form of communication with customers, partners and even competitors, try to use this tool engaging individual employees or PR managers, or in some cases, advertising managers and marketing managers. Admittedly, a critical mass of chief executive officers and managers of Russian companies has yet to subscribe to the view that blogging is a powerful cost-efficient tool of business communication that provides fast and effective feedback.

Today, a blog can be considered not only an information portal, but also a platform for collaboration, i.e. a socially-oriented, professional communication platform (Popov A., 2008).

Currently business experts highlight that information becomes cheaper, while the cost of managing it increases significantly. Therefore, it is logic to assume that a careful use of corporate blogging as a tool of managing information, can provide significant competitive advantages in the market and help to expand DMA (Dominant Marketing Area) of a company.

The general idea of a blog (the term originates from “web-log” - “Internet magazine”) – is a personal diary or notes that are published on the Internet in the public domain, in order to make them open to a wide circle of users. Over time, the functions and purpose of blogs expanded, leading to a more comprehensive understanding of them as

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communication channels. Today, a blog is no longer regarded simply as diary entries, but as an established system of communication between a company (producer of information) and a customer (recipient) on the Internet.

Depending on the content, blogs can vary. They can present the news, personal experiences or specialized information. But it should be noted that a blogger (a person, who keeps a blog) does not have to stick to one theme only, i.e. among other communications relating to the main theme (for example, marketing or fashion- industry), he/she can also write about abstract topics. There is almost no censorship in personal blogs, and space for self-expression is measured only by the imagination of a blog-keeper (<https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki>).

Blogs allow one to publish company news, which can be written in a lively and vivid language, with an original style of a blogger. Shaped like this, information will not be perceived as a formal and traditional press release, but as an interesting and eye-catching message.

Corporate blogging is a tool of interaction with a variety of audiences and in the first place – with the target audience. The purpose of a corporate blog is to create a constant, steady readership, which will be actively involved in communication leaving posts and comments. A corporate blog helps to build a two-way communication between the company and clients, including long-term friendly relationships based on the corporate transparency and social responsibility of the company.

Using a blog, a company can also improve an internal corporate relationship. Blogs can show how important the opinions of the employees are to a company, they can contribute to establishing effective communication with the employees and getting an up-to-date feedback. Due to such an important property of a blog as interactivity, a company may be able to respond to the proposals, initiatives and criticisms of the employees in proper time.

2. Russian successful blogging practice

According to business experts, the Russian market now has several companies that have been actively using corporate blogging in their activities and, therefore, can be referred to as efficient experiences in modern interactive communication. We will give a short review of the 3 largest ones.

1. Yandex is one of the largest internet companies in Europe, operating Russia's most popular search engine and its most visited website. According to LiveInternet, as of December 2013, it generated 61.9% of all search traffic in Russia. It also operates in Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Turkey (<http://clubs.ya.ru/company/?ncrnd=9109>).

This company knows all about RuNet (Russian-speaking Internet) and also about blogs. In its online journal one can find notes from the staff members of Yandex, who write about various new and useful things that they have come up with. For example, about new mobile applications from Yandex - Metro for iPhone. Many iPhone owners will appreciate it since they now can easily orient in the subway. The creators of the blog highlight that each employee of Yandex has his/her own inimitable style. After analyzing the content one can prove that fact. Each author of the Yandex blog writes in a different style and about different topics. A user can even find the so-called Tales from Yandex presented in the blog. Besides, the blog is unbelievably useful for those Internet users who have decided to use effectively all the possibilities offered by Yandex. It contains direct links to different functions and a description of how they work. The blog can also be useful for programmers who can copy needful things directly from it.

2. "Beeline" - is one of the largest telecommunication company in Russia (http://community.livejournal.com/telecom_press). They use their blog as a way to make the company more open to the rest of the world. For large companies, such as Beeline, it is an important part of their business to work with the public and investors. In this regard, their decision to write not only about the company in particular, but also the telecommunications market as a whole. The Press office of the company has set a task of creating a press club — a community of PR professionals, analysts, experts and journalists who work in the telecom industry, or write about it. Since the language used is clear and can be easily understood by laymen, it makes it interesting for users to share their opinions.

3. Russian Railway Company is famous for its blog dedicated to the "Sapsan" ("Peregrin Train"). Peregrin is a symbol of a comfortable and incredibly stylish vehicle. It took less than a year since the launch of the fastest train in Russia, but the original meaning of the word "peregrin" already seems to be forgotten. The decision of the railway company to create a blog was understandable, since it is in the blogs where was a real war against the new trains launched by Russian Railways. There was so much negative gossip, so the employees of the press service of Russian Railways chose to speak to people directly. Since that time the blog of Russian Railway Company has published a lot

of beautiful pictures, interesting and useful information about the new directions of the "iron bird migration", as well as changes in the schedule, pricing policy, and many others. One of the most remarkable features of the blog is that its keepers are not afraid of controversial topics. They regularly publish posts, subtitled "Myths about Sapsan" where they tell about canceled trains, technical problems or other issues that are being discussed on the Internet. The latest news about the blog is an animated series where the main character Sapsanchik (Little Peregrin) is shown. Though the reviews of the cartoon differ, it has already collected more than a hundred thousand views on Youtube.

To develop the basic rules of corporate blogs, we analyzed recommendations by both international and domestic experts (among them are Nancy Flinn, Matt Everard, Jeff Bullas, Popov etc.). Thus, below are the key principles suggested by Russian experts for developing and maintaining a corporate blog:

1. The most important thing about creating a blog is working out a concept, which would be interesting to your target audience. Many companies make the same mistake: they are a monologic, rather than going out for a dialogue with their customers.
2. Convey accurate information about the company, avoiding the so-called "advertising" texts. The facts are easy to check, and superlatives are not interesting.
3. Design is a very important part of a corporate blog. First of all, the design of the blog should be comfortable and attract the readers. All logos and brand colors should not stick out.
4. Blogging involves not only providing information and communicating with visitors, but also regular commenting thematic communities and posts by regular readers. This will take up a lot of time, but the result will be positive.
5. When communicating with visitors you should not forget that online communication is different from business correspondence. Emoticons and abbreviations will help you to get rid of official tone and move to a more intimate, informal communication with the target audience.
6. Do not be afraid of the negative. As mentioned above, any feedback, both positive and negative, helps you to evaluate the quality of your products and services. In this context, the negative reviews are even more valuable.
7. Hold contests and promotions only for the readers of the blog. They are necessary to attract the audience and other bloggers.
8. Do not just prepare press releases. Provide bloggers with access to a wide range of internal company information: graphics, photographs, figures, and links to video and audio files, blogs of the employees, etc. If you already have a press release, give a link to it along with other sources.
9. As many journalists, some bloggers like publishing interesting and exclusive information. Give them a treat.

However, unfortunately we have to admit that the examples of Russian corporate blogging are mostly an exception from the rule, since a great deal of Russian companies still consider corporate blogs an optional attribute which pays much but can actually bring little. With regard to the international experience, it should be noted that corporate blogging is not just a tribute to fashion, but a thoughtful and deliberate action on the part of corporate executives. However, being aware of the necessity of a corporate blog is not a guarantee of having it work properly. Due to the fact that company blogs have now become a regular marketing activity in every industry, many executives and managers thoughtlessly copy other companies' blogging experience without analyzing their own specific features and individual character. Thus, they copy a number of most common sins in corporate blogging, including:

- posting solely about their own products,
- using a blog primarily as a sales tool,
- failing to create dynamic content,
- neglecting a blog for months,
- blogging under an obviously false persona,
- failing to maintain the appearance of a blog.

As one can say after analyzing a number of successful and failing blogging experiences, one of the most difficult aspects of running a good company blog is generating the right kind of content. Posts need to be consistently interesting and innovative, remaining on-brand without resorting to generic sales-speak. Among many others, we

would suggest Marriott International should be considered as an excellent example of one of the most interesting, honest and effective corporate blogging. Written from the first-hand perspective of CEO Bill Marriott himself, the posts are a mix of his own insights on the hotel industry, tips for business success, celebrations of Marriott milestones, his insights on current affairs in the world, and his personal life like his own heart attacks, and the tragic death of his son. This refreshing honesty is unusual in the world of corporate blogging, and has solidified the popularity of the blog (Flynn N., 2008).

After analyzing the practice of a number of international companies like Starbucks, General Electric, Southwest Airlines and others that are well-known for their outstanding blogs, we have come up with the features that are considered to be most attractive by international blog readers.

3. The features that make a blog interesting to Russian and international readers

The Marriott Company blog described above can serve as a best example, since it perfectly shows the number of key features that would traditionally attract an international blog's audience. They are:

- sharing one's own experience, especially if you have expertise,
- being authentic, since personality is a vital ingredient for any company – it separates great companies from the rest,
- entertaining content.

In contrast, Russian blog's audience, as seen from the examples above, would rather appreciate such features of the blog as:

- providing reliable information that would be useful in everyday life,
- being creative in ways of communication.

4. Conclusion

We believe that this difference of opinion could have possibly come not only from the difference of cultural foundations, but as well from different economic situations in the countries. The Russian economy is younger than that of the Western countries, and it has undergone more enormous shocks for the last two decades, and is still on its way to the stable development. Therefore, what Russian people need more is reliable information and new ways of self-expression, while international blog readers are more selective choosing a shared experience, authentic personalities, and entertainment.

A corporate blog, as well as any other tool of promotion, has its pros and cons. It would be wrong to assume that an online diary is a panacea that can replace other PR techniques to promote the company and its services. However, each company decides on the use of a promotion tool, based on the type of its business and goals. But it must be understood that corporate blogging is one of the most popular and powerful PR trends which would provide a company with possibilities that could hardly be overestimated.

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