

# ALL THE WRITE MOVES

EVERYTHING YOU  
NEED TO KNOW  
ABOUT BLOGGING—  
FROM WHY TO START  
AN ASSOCIATION  
BLOG TO HOW TO  
KEEP IT THRIVING

BY STACEY L. BELL

Few innovations have held such sway over our lives as the Internet. From finding jobs, a home, a car, or even a new love interest or friend, more people are turning to the Web for help.

While many associations have embraced electronic media—devoting much thought to developing and maintaining interesting Web sites and e-newsletters—fewer have instituted a blog. Of the respondents to the recently released *E-Publishing Trends & Metrics* study ([www.angerosaresearch.org](http://www.angerosaresearch.org)) fewer than one in five (19%) report having an association blog.

Social media adviser Jeff De Cagna estimates that fewer than 1 percent of all associations have created a Web log, or blog, an online journal that shares news or commentary to engage niche audiences or markets in conversation.

Considering that blog search engine Technorati ([www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com)) had counted 102.4 million blogs worldwide as of early September, why the reticence in the association community?

“I think associations are still afraid of the technology, concerned about legal exposure and risk, and worried about the amount of work and potential costs associated with creating a blog,” says De Cagna, who is chief strategist and founder of Principled Innovation, LLC, a consulting firm based in Reston, VA.

## EASIER THAN YOU THINK

Worthwhile worries, granted. Fortunately, they don't really play out in the real world, according to communications professionals at sev-

eral associations that have launched blogs in recent years. Creating a blog, they note, is as easy as creating an e-mail. Numerous software packages are available, and if you're able to type an e-mail, you can just as easily post a blog entry.

Inappropriate content hasn't been a problem either. "I temper my views a bit because I'm speaking for the organization, even though my name is on the posting," says Ryan Johnson, director of information development and public affairs for WorldatWork, the Total Rewards Association in Scottsdale, AZ. "I'm more likely to withhold judgment on some things and attempt to convey news and some perspective only, as opposed to what I might say in a personal blog."

Because most association bloggers echo Johnson's perspective, and because blogs are meant to be a timely means of communication, few association CEOs review blog entries in advance. Most blogs are overseen by a communications staffer.

Nor has the time required to blog been a concern, according to Barbara M. Hunter, director of communications for the National School Boards Association (NSBA) in Alexandria, VA.

NSBA launched its blog, *BoardBuzz* (<http://boardbuzz.nsba.org>), in January 2004 after several thirty-somethings at the association convinced senior management that a blog would create an important presence in the blogosphere and allow NSBA to promote its message in another way.

"We try to post one or two items each day, and it takes about an hour," Hunter says. "It's nothing really, given its success."

*BoardBuzz* draws 165,000 unique visitors each month, and that figure has been increasing by about 10,000 visitors monthly. "It's been phenomenal," Hunter says. "It stuns even us that we have that many readers."

De Cagna says more associations should be striving to attract large numbers of readers. He notes, "Global conversation on every conceivable subject is occurring on the Web. Associations have two choices: Be part of this global conversation, or don't be a part of it.

"If you're not blogging, you're not going to be part of the information flow that people access when they Google and perform other Web searches," De Cagna continues. "If you don't take the risk, you'll miss

## FINDING INSPIRATION

To check out a few blogs published by associations, go to [www.association-socialmedia.com](http://www.association-socialmedia.com).

The Association Social Media Wiki currently lists more than 50 association blogs and is a free resource for the association community. (A "wiki" is a collaborative Web site that can be edited by anyone who can access it.) Jeff De Cagna of Principled Innovation, LLC, who set up the site in early 2006, encourages all associations to add their blog URLs to the wiki.

"Within the next 18 to 24 months, I hope it will become less of a reference source and more of a learning resource," says De Cagna. "It will include content on what to do, why, and how various associations have created blogs or other social media more effectively." —S.L.B.

greater opportunities for success and impact."

## BLOGGING 101

One of the first steps in creating a successful blog, De Cagna says, is clearly defining your blog's purpose.

"Are you going to share news? Market a conference to members? Engage in conversation around certain issues of importance to the association? Define the blog's purpose and why it's important," De Cagna advises. "Also decide who the author or authors will be. Will it be written by the association CEO or the chief elected officer? The editor-in-chief of the magazine, a researcher, or a public policy expert?"

Many associations use their blogs for several purposes: to share news, market products and conferences, and elicit members' opinions about topics of interest.

"I cull through the information related to our members' profession in magazines, newspapers, the Web, radio, TV, and other media since they don't have the time to review so many sources. I'll then blog about, 'Isn't this provocative?' or 'I disagree' with the points made in this article, and include a link," Johnson says. "We use our blog to keep members informed, to create conversations, and to let them get to know someone at their association, to associate a face with the organization."

*Ryan Johnson's WorldatWork Blog* debuted in January 2006 and is one of the five most popular sections within WorldatWork's Web site ([www.worldatwork.org](http://www.worldatwork.org)), then click on "Networking" and "Blog—Ryan Johnson"). Johnson is the sole author.

In contrast, the Healthcare Financial Management Association (HFMA) has developed a stable of contributors to write

its blog, *HFMA Views*, which launched in January 2006 ([www.hfma.org/hfmaviews](http://www.hfma.org/hfmaviews)). The association's magazine editor, technical directors, and chief executive officer, as well as invited consultants and healthcare providers, write the postings.

"Our blog is part of a more integrated approach for giving information to members; it wasn't conceived in isolation," notes Rob Fromberg, editor-in-chief at HFMA in Westchester, IL. "Our blog gives updates on current events, ongoing management challenges, and personal experiences that can be related to professional experiences. We've found that it's a great additional venue for certain types of information."

For instance, when the movie "Sicko" hit theaters, it raised issues that were best addressed via a blog rather than in HFMA's magazine or through a news release. Blogs—with their lively, conversational writing styles and more informal attitude—can be the perfect vehicle for sharing thoughts.

## QUICK TAKES

Of course, those thoughts should be shared in bite-sized pieces, Fromberg adds. Site Meter, which offers free software that will track how many hits a blog receives, says the average reader spends 96 seconds reading a blog. The average person reads 320 words a minute, which means blog readers will scan only about 200 words during their stay. So postings should get straight to the point.

"Most of our postings are two to five paragraphs in length," Barbara Hunter says. She adds that it's important to keep content fresh to keep readers coming back. NSBA accomplishes this by relying on 10 regular contributors to provide diverse edi-

torial on a wide range of topics. NSBA also posts pictures, videos, and other media to keep the blog visually stimulating.

"For the coming year, we're inviting school board members with their own blogs to be a guest blogger for a month, to capture the voice of the educational leader on the ground," Hunter adds. "We'll ask them to submit one to two entries a week."

While most blog entries are arranged in reverse chronological order, NSBA categorizes every entry under subject headings such as "advocacy" or "school law." Keywords and a searchable database have been added to make it easy for readers to find postings about particular topics.

## BONUS BENEFITS

Beyond creating a stronger, more communicative association community, blogs also can offer some unexpected benefits.

For example, they can generate a greater sense of excitement and community at annual conferences. NSBA's Blog Central booth at its annual conference features four computers, so attendees can read the comments of a dozen guest bloggers who write about their observations of what's new at the show, session content, and conversations they've had with fellow attendees. Attendees are encouraged to leave their own comments.

"It helps people not attending the conference to feel like they're there, and it builds a real sense of community among attendees," Hunter says. "People love to contribute their personal views about their conference experience."

Further, a blog can reach unexpected audiences. When NSBA did a pop-up survey one year ago, for example, it found that nearly 50 percent of blog readers are school board members; 14 percent are superintendents and school district administrators; 2 percent are principals; and the remaining readers are parents, school attorneys, and reporters. While an association may initially write a blog with only its members in mind, remember that the blog lies in a public forum and can thus garner your association much more publicity and outreach, further establishing you as an expert in your field.

Bloggging content also can benefit other parts of your organization. Fromberg says that one of his most prolific bloggers has been so passionate on the subject of pre-

vention that his postings encouraged Fromberg to use the blogger as a writer in HFMA's magazine and run more articles on that topic.

"Sometimes someone will contribute a topic that leads me to investigate whether we as an association should devote more sustained attention to a new area," Fromberg observes.

## MORE TO COME

Some would argue that associations which currently have a blog are already ahead of the curve. So it's not surprising that these forward-thinking associations are still searching for ways to better serve their members through new media.

"You have to constantly keep innovating," Hunter believes. She adds, for example, "Our tech person is constantly tweaking how readers can subscribe beyond an RSS feed, adding our blog to the Google and Yahoo toolbars, and sending blog updates via e-mail."

In September, NSBA started collecting one week's worth of BoardBuzz items and asking internal staff to read the postings; the resulting podcasts are offered on

iTunes. The association is also moving toward offering advertising on its blog.

HFMA has been making a more formal assessment of its blogging role. "We are looking at our blogs and what we should be doing about contributing to other people's blogs," Fromberg explains. "Associations can gain more traction by contributing to well-established blogs and other outlets, so we're determining our strategy for how we should participate in MySpace, Facebook, and other social media."

Each day, more than 175,000 new blogs are introduced, and 1.6 million-plus new blog entries are posted, Technorati estimates. Now is the time for more associations to be counted among these numbers.

"A blog should be seen as one more way to get your message out to your audience," Hunter concludes. "It's a fun and lively way to communicate. Blogs don't cost much beyond staff time, and their benefits can be phenomenal."

*Stacey L. Bell, a freelance writer based in Riverview, FL, specializes in business and marketing issues. You can reach her via e-mail at sbell7@tampabay.rr.com.*

## 5 KEYS TO BETTER BLOGS

If your association publishes a magazine, it also should have a blog. So says Jeff De Cagna of Principled Innovation, LLC. "It's the best way to create a strong Web presence," he believes. De Cagna offers these tips to associations:

**1. Get connected.** "Too many blogs are too isolated," he says. "You need to connect with other blogs, podcasts, and Web sites. Every post of a couple of paragraphs should have several links. Include a blog or link roll alongside your postings, showing those blogs or Web sites your association's blog authors read and respect."

"It's also important for bloggers in the association community to comment on other blogs to further expand your reach and credibility," De Cagna continues. "Subscribe to feeds for other blogs, and offer full-text feeds to your association's blog posts."

**2. Build new readership.** "Blogs let you change the nature of your normal publication content," De Cagna says. "You can be edgier and use a conversational style to extend the richness and reach of your publication."

**3. Integrate other social media tools.** By embedding video and audio clips, photos, and the occasional podcast into your blog, you'll keep content fresh and engaging.

**4. Revitalize previously used content.** Did attendees love one of the speakers at this year's annual conference? Six months later, invite the speaker to contribute a blog entry that updates his or her presentation.

**5. Think like a media company, not like a nonprofit organization.** Find ways to integrate different media and make publications more participatory. For example, De Cagna suggests holding regular conversations with readers about topics to cover—or give them the opportunity to edit articles using a blog or wiki.

Listen to De Cagna's full interview at <http://tinyurl.com/24hjkj>.—S.L.B.