From Pencils to Pixels: The Evolution of Content

by Paul Chin

Designers have a critical role to play when organizations transition marketing to the web. Here's how to maximize your contributions and position yourself as a major player.

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Designers have a formidable task when it comes to helping businesses make the initial transition from conventional forms of marketing, communications and commerce to the global playground we call the web. To begin with, they need to dispel the myth that the web will create a diaspora of traditional print-based marketers and content providers, sending them in droves to Human Resources in search of asylum from the onslaught of the new junta of web designers and software developers.

This can't be further from the truth. The web isn't a replacement or a takeover—it's an evolution. It's Darwin, not despot. And as in all things evolutionary, we either adapt or drop off the planet.

The instruments we once used as tools to generate the message—namely the computer—have evolved to become a carrier of the message itself. As the environment surrounding media consumption and dissemination evolves, so must businesses. They must evolve in parallel with the way people consume information in order to reach the largest possible audience—or risk extinction.

This is not to say there's no place for print. Print will always be a vital component of a business's overall marketing strategy. The web is simply an extension of that strategy—and one that can't be ignored. The challenge here is that this particular evolution doesn't occur naturally. When a business decides to augment its traditional marketing initiatives to include digital media and distribution, it often requires a helping hand from the very people they mistakenly thought they had to run from.

Understanding the evolution

The purpose of any marketing message—regardless of medium—remains the same: to sell, to inform or to entertain. If businesses are smart, they will encompass all three seamlessly. But not every business is aware of the true potential of the web as a content distribution medium or all of the tools that are available to connect and communicate with users.

It's a mistake for designers to go into a project with the assumption that their clients understand online media as well as they do. In fact, there will be times when a business's web strategy won't extend beyond the knowledge that it has to be on the web … in one form or another. It's the designer's role as expert to help businesses wade through the muck, and help them focus on the new media as well as the mindset required to work with it.

"My biggest problems," says Dave Shea—Vancouver, Canada-based designer and owner of Bright Creative (www.brightcreative.com)—"usually occur when a client can't differentiate between

site design and site functionality, and they fixate on placement and color at a stage in the project cycle when we're more concerned with establishing content types and user input."

Shea's comments reveal that web designers' jobs don't begin and end with the visual aesthetics of a website. They have to be equal parts designer, consultant, programmer and information architect. (I'll be covering the evolving role of the designer in the April/May 2007 issue of this magazine.)

Designers also need to understand more than websites; they must do some background work to familiarize themselves with their clients:

- Business and industry
- Target audiences
- Long-term business goals
- Motivation for going online
- Expectations once online
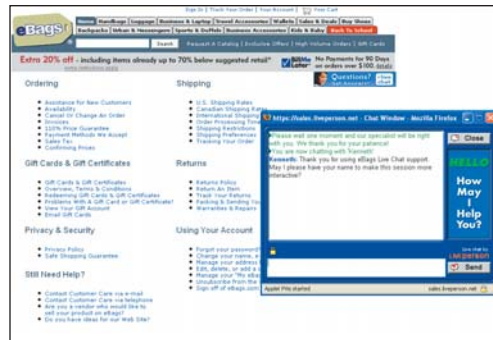
Online retailer **eBags.com**—Multichannel Merchant (MCM) Awards 2006 Website of the Year award recipient—uses real-time chat software to provide users with one-click access to a live customer support representative in addition to its static Help Center.

Australian pack maker **Crumpler** (www.crumpler.com.au) takes full advantage of the web's multimedia capabilities by using a humorous Flash-based presentation of company founders Dave Roper and Will Miller discussing milestones in company history.

Moosejaw (www.moosejaw.com), a U.S.-based retailer of outdoor adventure gear, augments the value of its printed catalog with not only an online catalog and e-commerce capabilities, but also fun and humorous water cooler content, contests and photos of customers displaying the Moosejaw brand.

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Porting print content to the web

Every established business has existing content in hard copy format—marketing brochures, press releases, product catalogs, manuals and other support material, professional portfolios—that it will eventually port onto its website.

The business must make a decision as to how best to present this content on a digital medium: Duplicate it, redesign it or combination of the two.

- **Duplicate:** Make an exact digital copy of the print content. This can be either an interactive digital catalog using Flash or a simple downloadable PDF version of the hard copy.

- **Redesign:** Develop a distinct design for each medium—print and web. Both, however, must reflect the same brand identity. (See "Digital Brand Identity: Marketing's Great Equalizer" in the February/March 2006, V11N1, issue of *Dynamic Graphics.*)

Duplication is definitely the quicker and less expensive of the two. But in order to maximize user retention on a website, a business's web offering should include something that can't be found in its print offering. Having identical content on two different media can be redundant and will do nothing to drive traffic to the site. A business's website needs to augment the value of its existing print content, not simply reproduce it.

"The last thing anyone wants," says Nick Cummins, creative director of Australian web design firm Sputnik Agency (www.sputnikagency.com), "is for a business to just replicate online what it has traditionally done in print. We get clients excited about the extra stuff that can be achieved online, above and beyond just having a brand presence."

Web content, however, has an evident disadvantage compared to print: It lacks tactile quality. But what web content lacks in tactile quality, it more than makes up in creative possibility, user interactivity and ease of distribution.

The web allows businesses to interact with users in a way that print can't. The important thing to keep in mind is that different media and content types require different design models—especially since web content is presented on a very small canvas, namely a computer monitor.

Prepping copy for the web

Print content lends itself to what I call "lawn chair" reading—that is, sitting back with a hard copy publication in hand and flipping through it leisurely. Web content, however, lends itself to quick, "click-and-run" scanning.

Even when the meaning of a message is identical, readers don't interpret print content the same way they interpret web content. (See "Keep Their Eyes on the Prize" in the August/September 2006, V11N4, issue of *Dynamic Graphics* for more information.)

According to an article by usability expert Jakob Nielsen (www.useit.com/alertbox/9703b.html), reading from computer screens is 25 percent slower than reading from paper; therefore, he suggests publishing no more than 50 percent of the text you would in a print publication.
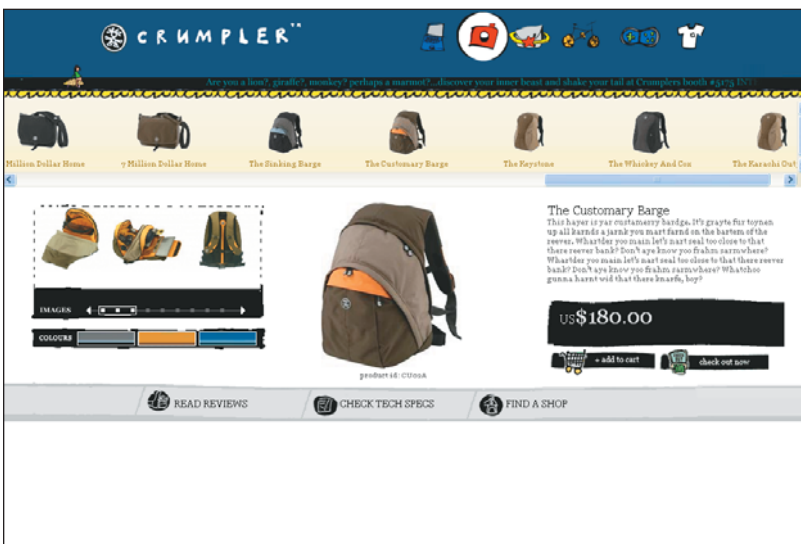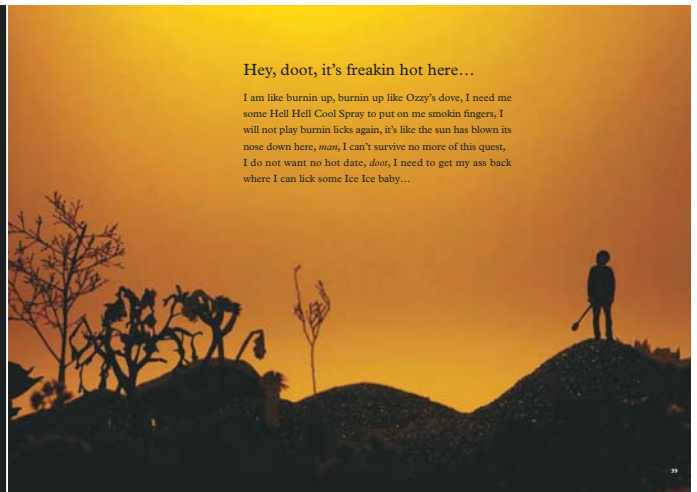
With this in mind, when presenting web copy:

- *Be brief and to the point*—Web users are less likely to read long streams of text or will only skim through it (which might diminish the intention and meaning of the content).
- *Maximize message with minimal space*—Don't pack every inch of screen real estate with content. Top-level web pages should include only core concepts. If you need to present more detailed information, provide links to subpages.
- *Split up text*—Text should be organized into multiple subsections over several pages rather than one long stream of continuous text on a single page.
- *Use point form*—When presenting many ideas at once, use point form rather than lengthy paragraphs.

Product catalog dimensions

Product catalogs are among the most commonly ported print content—whether by a manufacturer marketing its products or a retailer selling its wares. But simply giving customers digital equivalents of a print catalog doesn't do justice to the potential of the web medium: chiefly, customer interaction with the product.

Flash can be used to enhance a business's online catalog by allowing customers to zoom into and rotate products, view them in various colors and watch short movie clips of the products in action. Some online retailers will even allow customers to submit reviews of their products.

Crumpler, makers of bike messenger, camera and laptop bags, has taken full advantage of both print and web media—each complementing the other. "It's always nice to have something tactile to flick through with all the products laid out nicely for comparison," says Crumpler webmaster Jeff Boag. "The print catalog also has funny themes running through it that are different from what you see online." Crumpler has succeeded in using both print and web media to design very unique feels while staying true to its casual, humorous and unconventional brand identity.

THE SINKING BARGE, THE CUSTOMARY BARGE
3 COLOURS

black/mid grey/light blue
SI-01A

dk brown/oatmeal/light orange
SI-01A

navy/blue/pale blue
SI-01A

2 SIZES

The Sinking Barge
SI-↓

The Customary Barge
CU-↓

Camera & laptop back pack w/ fully configurable photo & cargo compartments, laptop sleeve, 5 pockets (2 zipped) 2 sizes. Sinking Barge fits up to 15" laptops, Customary Barge fits up to 17" laptops.

Hey, doot, it's freakin hot here...

I am like burnin up, burnin up like Ozzy's dove, I need me some Hell Hell Cool Spray to put on me smokin fingers, I will not play burnin licks again, it's like the sun has blown its nose down here, *man*, I can't survive no more of this quest, I do not want no hot date, *doot*, I need to get my ass back where I can lick some Ice Ice baby...

Crumpler takes advantage of the open and spatial nature of print to create a clean, eye-catching two-page spread in their hard copy catalog. Their online catalog takes advantage of the interactive nature of the web, allowing users to see their products in different colors and angles.

LensCrafters (www.lenscrafters.com), North America's largest retailer of prescription eyewear, made a Flash version of its hard copy print catalog on its website that mimics the physical actions of flipping through the printed counterpart.

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Artist portfolios

Many print artists use the web as a virtual art gallery in which to showcase their work and connect with current and potential clients. "At the beginning, I saw my website just like a web gallery, but I am now conscious of the full potential of a good website," says Yanick Déry, an internationally renowned fashion photographer based in Montreal. "I have clients who saw my work online first and then contacted me to work on their project."

But one of the biggest challenges with reproducing an artist's work on the web is to do it without losing the visual impact of the original. "I am not showing scans of tear sheets on my website, but pure, clean images straight from the original," Déry points out. "I was more concerned with how the website would look on different browsers and operating systems. Monitor size and resolution can change the perspective of my work, but I can't control this. The bigger challenge was to create the template and find a standard format to present my images."

Going digital didn't stop there for Déry. He saw the evolution to digital as a natural extension of his photography services and recently started a whole new business offering photo retouching services. "I decided to extend the retouching service to other photographers and direct clients," says Déry. "Retouching is complementary to what I have to offer and is now an independent business."

Delivering digital content

Websites are one of the best ways for a business to reach a large audience with minimal effort and cost, but they require users to "pull" content by actively going to the site. When new content is available, users won't know it's there unless they return to the site. This poses a problem for businesses that want to deliver time-sensitive content such as upcoming events or announcements of sales.

A website alone isn't enough to deliver digital content to an audience. Here are three of the various "push" delivery methods frequently used to complement a website:

1. Opt-in e-mails: E-mail allows businesses to reach a wide audience in a short amount of time for next to no money beyond the initial development and design of the content. E-mail for marketing, however, is different than e-mail for personal communication. Content designers need to get creative when using e-mail as a marketing vehicle, taking into account two stages of user attraction: first, grabbing the attention of readers before the e-mail is opened; and second, maximizing reader retention once the e-mail is opened.

Unlike a high quality printed brochure—something that's more likely to catch a reader's attention because of its tactile quality—an e-mail's window of opportunity is fairly small. To maximize the chances of an e-mail being seen and, more importantly, read:

- The message must be brief, clear and concise.
- The e-mail's subject header must be meaningful, giving users an indication of its content without opening it.
- E-mail should only be a hook to a business's website. It should contain just enough information to keep a user interested, with links to the website for more detailed information.

Opt-in e-mails are a subset of a wider group of permission marketing media. For more, see "Secrets of Permission Marketing," page 46 in this issue.

Problems With E-mail as a Marketing Vehicle

E-mail has lost some of its effectiveness as a marketing vehicle through no fault of its own. It became a victim of its own success when spammers used the medium to bombard users with everything from shady real estate to miracle hair growth products … and worse.

- A user inbox is a high traffic area: The more e-mail users receive in a day, the less likely a given item will be to attract attention. This is worsened if the user's inbox is disorganized.
- Messages can easily be mistaken for spam and deleted or blocked.
- It's indistinguishable from other e-mail.
- Users may have implemented a "whitelist"—a list of addresses the user is willing to accept e-mail from—or very restrictive spam filtering software.
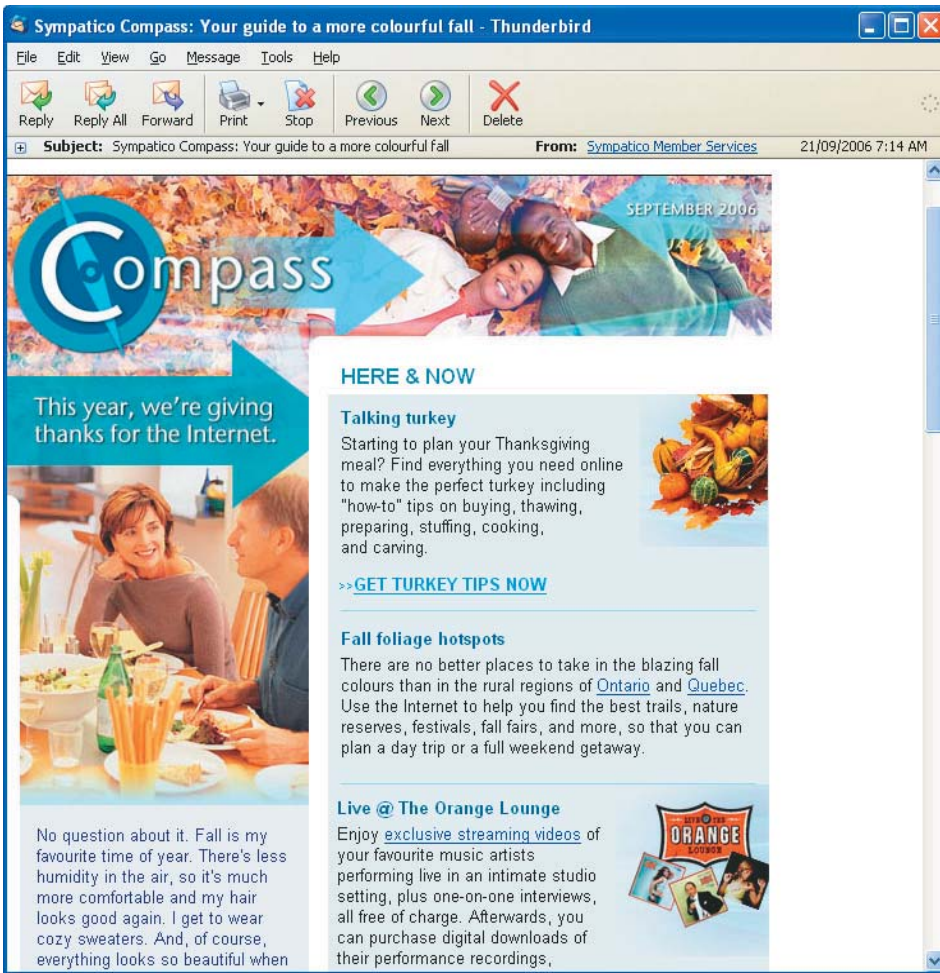
Canadian Internet service provider **Bell Sympatico's** opt-in e-newsletter *Compass* presents a clean design and concise copy that doesn't overwhelm users. By providing well–organized subsections and short descriptions with links to the full text, readers can get an overall impression of the e-mail's content with only a cursory glance. The flush left positioning of the newsletter also takes into account the limited real estate of the "container"—in this case an e-mail client window—thus minimizing the need for lateral scrolling.

Fashion photographer **Yanick Déry** (www.yanickdery.com) uses his website to showcase his portfolio and market services, allowing him to connect with current and potential clients. "I try to make it interesting for people who visit my website on a regular basis," says Déry, who has also recently launched a blog, "I also use my website to inform clients of new developments and events." Success has allowed him to extend his business with retouching services, photo correction, skin quality enhancement and visual effects.

2. RSS (Really Simple Syndication): RSS is an XML-based method of distributing and syndicating web content that allows users to subscribe to topical feeds. These feeds can be viewed with stand-alone software applications called aggregators, e-mail client applications and web browsers with RSS reader capabilities, or web-based aggregators.

Aggregators automatically check a user's list of subscribed feeds for new content and display it for them. The amount of content and frequency of delivery is entirely up to the user.

RSS and e-mail share similar design and presentation guidelines, but the former has some advantages over the latter:

- RSS feeds don't have to compete with hundreds of e-mail entries—personal and work messages, jokes from friends, newsletter subscriptions and, of course, spam—for users' attention.
- RSS is less intrusive than e-mail (although some marketers might see that as a disadvantage) since it doesn't get in the way of personal and work messages.
- RSS doesn't overwhelm users. Many RSS readers give users the option of viewing only a content summary with links to its associated website or the entire document.
- RSS feeds won't be blocked by any filters, so the message is sure to get through.
- Users don't need to provide any personal information such as an e-mail address, so they might be more willing to sign up for content.

Although the potential for RSS as a marketing vehicle is great, it hasn't been widely adopted by businesses as a core component of marketing programs or accepted by users as a means of receiving content.

RSS suffers from an identity crisis, due largely to user perception. Many casual and nontechnical users tend to avoid acronyms, and this one doesn't exactly scream "sexy." The name isn't even descriptive of what the medium does and may mean little to the average user. Would so many nontechnical users have jumped onto the website bandwagon over 10 years ago if they were called HTTP sites?

3. Blogs: Blogs, born from online diarists and citizen journalists, have gained a lot of traction as a business tool for the delivery of serial content—both on a website and through an RSS feed. They can be used to connect with an audience and to
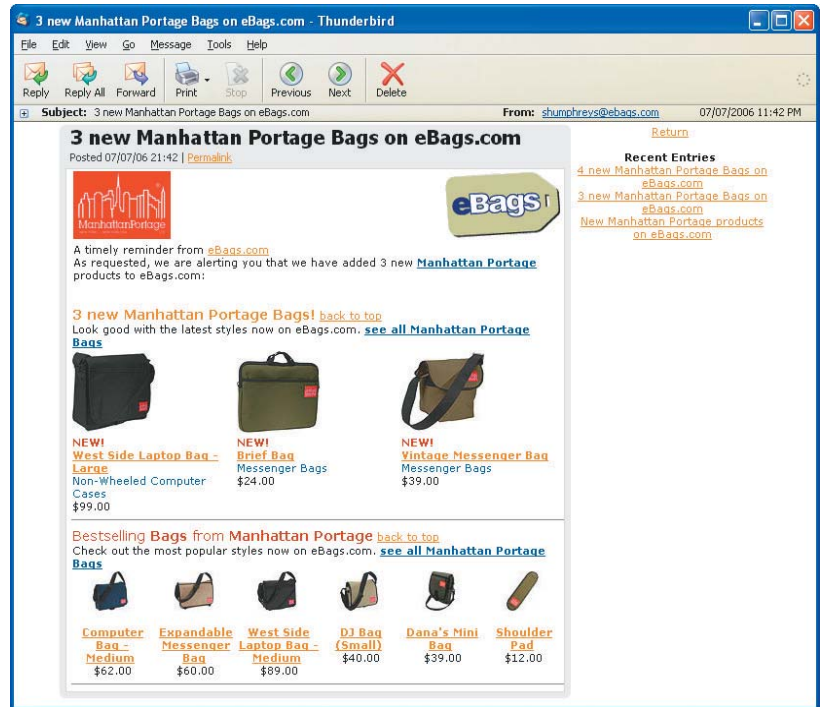
inform them of the business's current activities and future developments.

One of the most appealing things about blogs is that they tend to be less formal than most other forms of content. Blogs are not press releases issued by a business; they're written by a person with a face and personality. They're a fantastic way to "humanize" a business since they take on the voice of the author, not the business.

Podcasts and vodcasts (video podcasts) are very similar to blogs except they use audio and video, respectively, rather than text. This subject will be covered in an upcoming issue of *Dynamic Graphics.*

Evolution is progress

The evolution from print to web requires a new mindset. It's a mindset that must include both the adoption of new design models to accommodate digital media and a firm understanding of the methods for transmitting the content.

But beyond media, the tried and true principles of marketing and communication still stand: creative design and interesting copy. You can have the most advanced technology at your disposal, but without knowledge of the fundamentals of design and copywriting it won't matter if you have a crayon or a hologram. Without a solid foundation to build upon, your evolution might end up a mutation. ⓖ

eBags.com uses RSS feeds—shown here on Thunderbird (www. mozilla.com), an RSS-capable e-mail client—to inform users of additions to their website as well as new product offerings. Rather than providing a general "what's new" catchall that will likely flood users' RSS aggregator with a lot of unwanted content, eBags.com provides separate RSS feeds for each brand it carries so users have full control over the content they receive.
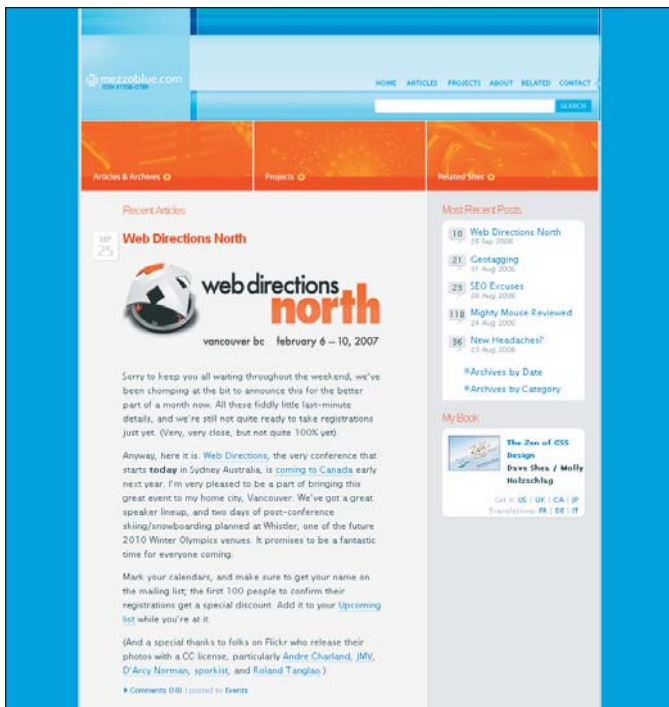
Web designer Dave Shea uses his blog **mezzoblue.com** to discuss all matters related to the web and web design, as well as to announce upcoming events he's involved with.

Moosejaw uses its blog not for informational purposes, but for high entertainment value, delivering humorous water cooler content that promotes its "Love the madness" tag line.

8 Success Factors for Blogs:
There are a lot of things you can do to improve and maximize your blog readership:

Stay on topic—Every blog should have a central focus. Users follow particular blogs because they contain content that's of interest to them. But if a business feels the need to cover everything from Web 2.0 to yeti sightings within a single blog, users will lose patience and interest. A blog that tries too hard to be everything to everyone will end up being very little to anyone.

Cater to your audience—Match the tone and content of the blog to your core audience. If your primary readership is comprised of hip graphic designers, don't write like the CEO of an insurance company.

Be yourself—Don't try being someone you're not. If you're Dick Cheney, don't try writing like you're Robin Williams—you'll sound like a hack. Readers follow blogs because they enjoy not only the topic, but the personality of the blogger. If you fake it, readers will know.

Find your voice—Those who aren't used to writing anything aside from internal memos or press releases might find it difficult to uncover a true writing voice. Practice, practice, practice!

Be natural—Unless your blog is meant to be formal, write like you're speaking with a close friend. You can connect with readers by writing in first- and second-person voices. Don't wax poetic if you don't yet possess strong writing skills to do so.

Post on a regular basis—Because of the real-time nature of web content over print, readers expect new posts on a regular basis. This means, at the very least, once or twice a week—not once a month.

Keep it short—A blog isn't a book. Some readers might not have time or the patience to read lengthy entries, so unless it's time sensitive, split it up into multiple posts.

Allow user feedback—Allowing users to provide comments at the end of blog entries encourages discussion and helps build community content. If you're worried that inappropriate user comments will negatively impact the site and business, user feedback can be moderated for obscenities, spam and relevancy before it goes live.