

Clear Blogging

How People Blogging Are
Changing the World and
How You Can Join Them



Bob Walsh

Apress®

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CHAPTER 9



Successful Blogging

“The Medium is the Message” because it is the medium that shapes and controls the search and form of human associations and action.

—Marshall McLuhan, twentieth-century media theorist

Marshall McLuhan might well have been talking about blogging instead of traditional media. The medium called blogging profoundly shapes what you say and how you say it, what you talk about in blog posts, and how others can discover what you’ve written. This chapter addresses three questions that every blogger needs to have answered to be successful:

- How do I find things to blog about?
- How do I write my blog so others want to read it?
- How do I help other people find my blog?

Along the way, we’re going to shoot some arrows into some of the leading rationales people find to avoid blogging:

- It’s impossible to keep up with everything in the blogosphere, so why try?
- You have to be a good writer to blog.
- No one is ever going to read my blog, so why bother?

Here’s a quick preview of what we’ll be looking at in this chapter:

- How to build your own Blogosphere Radar Screen so you can find things to write about
- How to write posts well, **easily**, day in and day out
- Useful tools for improving your writing
- Connecting your blog, post by post, to the blogosphere at large, so hundreds, thousands, and **even millions of people can find it**

Now, if this chapter’s introduction seems a bit different than those in the other chapters in this book, that’s because it’s a lot more like a blog post than a chapter introduction. It’s designed to get some blood flowing, start some juices going, and get you involved with this chapter. Later in the chapter, we’ll come back to why bullet points, bold text, terse writing, and short sentences

are a blogger's best friends. Let's begin with a look at three major techniques for finding things to post about.

Finding Your Posts

The first step to finding what to blog about—whether you're going to do a personal, professional, or business blog—is to pick at least an initial set of topics that you are interested in and passionate about. Blogging takes time and effort, so you want to focus on the people, things, and subjects in which you have a deep, abiding interest. And you want to stick to subjects not just interesting to you in an academic, detached way, but subjects you really care about.

Pick Your Beats

One of the more useful ideas of mainstream journalism is the idea of *beats*.¹ This concept came over from days when cops walked a beat and knew every merchant, kid in trouble, and apple stand on it. For reporters, there are the city hall beat, the cop beat, the science beat, and more.

Bloggers—especially influential, well-read bloggers—have beats they cover as well. For example, Steve Rubel's Micro Persuasion blog (www.micropersuasion.com) covers social networks, social media, Wikipedia, and more.² Guy Kawasaki's blog at <http://blog.guykawasaki.com> covers entrepreneurship, marketing, venture capital, and tech evangelism. Seth Godin's blog at <http://sethgodin.typepad.com> covers marketing, viral ideas, and the New Economy.

Nor is it just A-Listers who have beats. At my three blogs, I cover Getting Things Done online, the micro-ISV beat, and the whys and wherefores of clear blogging. Knowing what you want your blog to be about clears a lot of mental underbrush away so you can focus your writing and your reading on what matters.

So what do you, Mr. or Ms. Cub Reporter Blogger, want to cover? Here's a form to help you get started defining your beats:

Your top three: Name up to three beats you are interested in and passionate about.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Subtopics for beat 1: Get more specific about topic 1. For example, if you said "the law," do you mean contract, patent, tort, civil, or criminal law; litigation; or the law profession?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3..

1. Of course, there are also the mainstream journalism principles of writing the truth as best you know it and checking your facts.
 2. Steve talks about how he finds things to blog about at www.micropersuasion.com/2006/09/how_to_create_a.html.

Subtopics for beat 2: Same deal—which parts of topic 2 do you want to read about, or interview influential people about, or disagree violently with?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Subtopics for beat 3: You guessed it—get specific with topic 3. The more specific you can be, the easier it is to find things to blog about.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Extra credit: Another way to ask this is to name the top three blogs you read and follow. What is it about them you like? What do they cover?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Keep in mind that your blog and the beats you cover on it will change as time goes on. All you're looking for now is a starting point you find interesting and can be passionate about. With your three subjects firmed up, you're ready to build what I call your Blogosphere Radar Screen.

Build Your Blogosphere Radar Screen

So you know what you want to cover, now what? Now you need to build an easy means to spot postings, news stories, and happenings in your areas of interest. You need to build a gizmo so you can find just the things you want to blog about and on. Ideally, you want something that has these qualities:

- Is automatic once it's running.
- Takes as little time to operate as possible.
- Is available everywhere, and in both Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox.
- Is free—free is good!

The Blogosphere Radar Screen is an idea I gleefully borrowed from Steve Rubel (Micro Persuasion). It's how he keeps up on the multitude of happenings he covers for his blog. Here's how you can build your own version in about 15 minutes.

1. Get a Google homepage and add a Radar tab to it.

If you're not using Google's personalized homepage as your homepage already, visit www.google.com/ig to create one, and then in your browser's preferences, set <http://www.google.com/ig> as your homepage. As of about mid 2006, Google homepage started supporting adding tabs so you could better group Google Gadgets³ and RSS feeds. Add a tab, and name it Radar, as shown in Figure 9-1.



Figure 9-1. Your Google homepage and Radar tab

2. With your Radar tab active, click Add More to This Page.

This will take you to the Google Homepage Content Directory, where you'll find all kinds of Google Gadgets that you can add to your homepage, custom RSS feeds from numerous news and tech organizations, and more. For now, resist the urge to digress and go to the next step.

3. Click the Add by URL link next to the Google search button.

One neat, underexplained feature of the Google homepage is the ability to add any RSS feed, including feeds created by searching for specific topics in Google Blog Search and Google News, to name two sources. The link itself is easy to miss at first glance. Take a quick look at Figure 9-2 to get your bearings. Figure 9-3 shows what should appear after you click this link.



Figure 9-2. Note the Add by URL link.

-
3. Google Gadgets are small applets that run within Google's homepage or within Google's Desktop Search sidebar. They can do anything from bringing you personalized weather reports or sports scores to tracking your fitness.

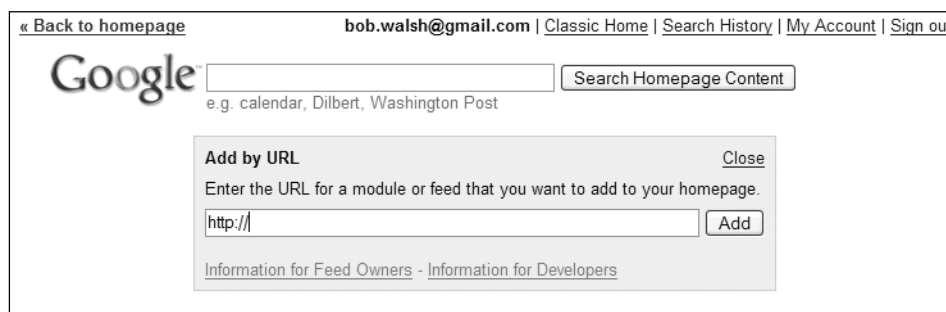


Figure 9-3. The Add by URL box

4. In a new Firefox or Internet Explorer tab or window, open Google Blog Search at <http://blogsearch.google.com>.

For now, you're going to make your Radar Screen an all-Google affair. You could just as easily do the following steps from any search engine or service that creates a custom RSS feed for a search. As of this writing, Yahoo, IceRocket, and numerous Web 2.0 sites offer this feature.

5. Create a search for your first blog beat.

You can create a simple search (such as “Time Management”), but you'll probably get better results if you build a more complex search (such as “Getting Things Done” OR “David Allen” OR “Time Management”). Creating more powerful Google searches is a topic for an entire book. Here are three recommendations:

- *Google Pocket Guide* by Tara Calishain et al. (O'Reilly, 2003). My personal favorite—short and sweet.
- *Google Hacks: Tips & Tools for Finding and Using the World's Information* by Rael Dornfest and Tara Calishain (O'Reilly, 2006). All sorts of things you can do with Google. More technical.
- *Google: The Missing Manual* by Sarah Milstein and Rael Dornfest (O'Reilly, 2006). Reputed to be a good read for nonprogrammers.

When Google returns its search results, you can fine-tune your search by how old each post is. Key point: The more results you get back, the more active the topic, the more restricted your search should be. Here's why: Your Blogosphere Radar Screen's primary job is to alert you to *active blog conversations you can join*. If your area of interest is relatively narrow, such as “Getting Things Done,” you might get about ten new search hits a day, which is a manageable number. On the other hand, “copyright law” returned 223 new hits a day, which are too many to track, and a good reason to dial down to, say, results in the last hour.

- 6. Click the RSS Feed button, copy the URL you got, and paste it into the Add by URL field back on your Radar tab. Click Add.**

Congratulations! You've just built the first part of your Blogosphere Radar Screen. Now repeat the process for each of your other blog beats.

Of course, just looking at what's going on in the blogosphere is a little one-sided. Repeat this process of searching and adding to your Radar tab from at least a few of the following sources:

- Google News (<http://news.google.com>)
- Technorati's Discover area (<http://technorati.com/discover>), where you'll find custom general RSS feeds for entertainment, life, sports, business, technology, and more
- Original Signal (www.originalsignal.com), which covers topics like Web 2.0, technology, business, general news, and entertainment
- Bloggers you read and want to track (add their RSS feeds)
- FeedMiner (www.feedminer.com), where you can find feeds on topics you're interested in, and then add them selectively to your Radar tab

- 7. Click the Back to Homepage link, and then rearrange your search results to suit your preferences.**

Besides arranging your feeds on your Radar tab, you can set how many items you want to see for each feed. Each time you return to your homepage Radar tab, it will do another sweep.

Figure 9-4 shows my Blogosphere Radar Screen. With it, I can track my blog beats, my commercial products, and mentions of the books I've written. When I see something interesting, I can pop it open in another tab, blog about it, add a comment, or squirrel it away as something I might post about one day.

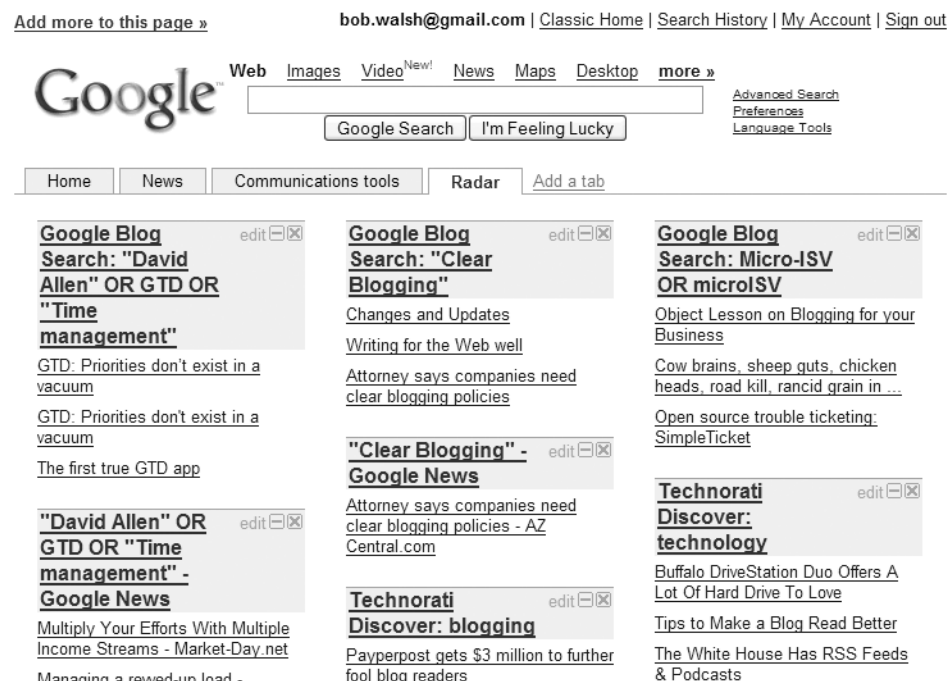


Figure 9-4. The Radar tab in action

Tips for Finding Post Topics

While your Radar tab makes it easy to track topics, it shouldn't be the only arrow in your arsenal. Googling "find blog topics," "blog tips," "ideas for blog posts," and the like will lead you to more good tricks and tips for sparking your blog fire than you can shake a stick at.

What follows is my personal list of ideas, tricks, and techniques I use to keep the posts flowing.

Theme Your Blog

Just as newspapers have beats to make it easier for reporters to know what to cover, they have specific sections on the same day each week: a food section on Thursdays, opinion on Sundays, and so on. Do the same for your blog.

For each day you plan to regularly blog, have a set direction you will tend to go. Frequency and regularity are important to your readers.⁴ This approach also makes it easier to plan how much time you need for blogging and gives you a fallback answer to the question, "What am I going to blog about today?"

How detailed, flexible, and even recognizable your themes are is entirely up to you. If you're already blogging, take a look at your old posts and especially your FeedBurner or TypePad statistics to see what commonalities your most popular posts have. If you're just starting up your blog, your blog beats make for good themes.

4. And so is infrequently dropping in something unexpected, just to liven things up!

I've ended up with one blog apiece for the three beats I'm most interested in, rather than one blog with too little focus.

Here's my theme plan for `ToDoOrElse.com`:

- **Applied Mondays:** Usually a shorter post on ways I've found to apply or implement or use one Getting Things Done component.
- **Online Tuesdays:** This is a longer look at usually one Web 2.0 site I've found useful, with a focus on streamlining or improving one part of life online.
- **Big Deal Wednesdays:** This is the most in-depth post of the week, or an interview with someone who has something useful to say about Getting Things Done (online or off). These posts take the most time to research and write, so I work on them in stages over the week.
- **Weekly Link Thursdays:** Here's where my `ToDoOrElse.com` `del.icio.us` annotated bookmarks post weekly (see the "A Tasty Bit of `Del.icio.us`" section near the end of this chapter).

For `MyMicroISV.com`, I've come up with this theme plan:

- **Business Mondays:** Post about some micro-ISV-related business, as opposed to technical, topic.
- **Technical Tuesdays:** Post about some micro-ISV-related techie topic.
- **Guest Post Wednesdays:** These are guest posts or interviews of interest to micro-ISVs.
- **Theory into Practice Thursdays:** These posts tend to be how to apply one good idea to some aspect of running a micro-ISV.
- **Fridays:** Weekly links.

And here's the theme plan for `ClearBlogging.com`:

- **Mondays:** Clear Blogging tip of the week.
- **Tuesdays:** Clear Blogging interview of the week.
- **Resource Wednesdays:** A set of three techniques, tools, or tricks with TypePad or WordPress.
- **Thursdays:** Weekly links.

Maintain a Story List

Here's another technique newspaper managing editors have used for a hundred years or so to fill their papers: Maintain a list of ideas you want to blog about. Keep a blog story list on paper, your computer, a wiki, or whatever way best works for you.

Blogging story lists are naturally tightly tied to what's happening online, so there are really two components for each item on your list: the idea, point, or observation you want to make and links to other things online that are relevant and valuable to your readers.

Over the years, I've used paper lists, Excel files, outlining applications, and my own commercial products. Here are four quick tricks for getting the most value out of a blog story list:

Make just enough of an entry. A line or two to capture the idea and your approach is enough. Keep your entries short.

Review your list regularly and weed as needed. Last week's brainstorm is this week's puddle. Use your list to marinate your big posts.⁵

Keep your corresponding links in your browser. One easy way to do this is to number your entries in your blog story list, and then create a matching folder in Firefox, Internet Explorer, or your favorite social bookmarking website. That way, when you go back to blog idea 23, you can easily find folder 23 in, say, Firefox.

Use your story list as a log. When you've posted on an item on your list, enter the date and mark it off, but don't delete it. You want the ability to go back and see what you've already covered and how long ago. It's easy to forget and painful to remember too late.

Share Your Knowledge

Whatever your interests and whatever you blog about, sharing what you know and what you know how to do are surefire ways of getting readers. Keep in mind that new people are always coming to every part of the blogosphere, and it never hurts to recap topics you might think everyone knows about. Trust me, they don't, or they forgot and could use a quick refresher.

Do Reviews

Whether it's the latest programming library, power saw, or scalpel, your blog readers appreciate a good product or service review. In fact, many a well-known blog consists of just product reviews and announcements; two examples are Gizmodo (www.gizmodo.com) and Engadget (www.engadget.com).

Here are some common-sense pointers about doing blog reviews:

Back up your opinions. If you hate a product, explain why. If you love a new release, share why with your readers.

Be up-front with your readers. Just exactly how did you get that item? Did you buy it, rent it, or get it from the manufacturer? Your credibility is at stake, and your readers will want to know.

Write for your readers, not the vendors. If you do review products, you'll quickly find everyone who makes a product or service will want you to tell their story their way. Don't go that way. People who read your blog want your opinion, not a regurgitation of marketing hype.

Show and tell. Product reviews are much more interesting and, frankly, easier to do with a healthy helping of images. Haul out your digital camera, grab a good screenshot application like TechSmith's SnagIt, and start making pictures worth a thousand-word post.

5. See <http://lifedev.net/2006/08/blog-post-marinate-forming-great-ideas> for a great post on this idea.

Take the Inverted Pyramid Approach

One more idea worth “liberating” from mainstream media: the inverted pyramid approach to writing. Start with the punch line, rather than ending with it. Put your strongest points first, because your readers may not have the time or the inclination to read your entire missive.

Accessorize Longer Posts

Even if you’re the next Hemingway, your longer posts are going to need some help getting across to your blog’s readers. A big mass of gray type is as unappetizing as day-old cat food to most people. If your post is going long—say, more than six paragraphs—start finding ways to break up the text with relevant images, bullet points, subheadings, pullout quotations, or anything that gives your readers a break. They will thank you for it.

ELEVEN IDEAS TO MAKE OR BREAK YOUR BLOG, BY RAJESH SETTY

Two particularly good lists of tips to keep your blog healthy come with permission from Rajesh Setty, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and respected blogger. Rajesh’s excellent blog, Life Beyond Code, can be found at <http://blog.lifebeyondcode.com>.

The screenshot shows a blog post on the 'Life BEYOND CODE' website. The post title is 'Eleven Ideas to Make or Break Your Blog, by Rajesh Setty'. The main content includes a quote from Susan Scott: "It's not what you think...it's what you say" - Susan Scott (from Fierce Conversations). Below the quote, the author discusses the importance of distinguishing between reactions and responses. The post also features two sidebars: 'BUY THE BOOK (US)' and 'BUY THE BOOK (INDIA)', both listing various online retailers for the book 'BEYOND CODE' by Rajesh Setty. The right sidebar contains a login form, a search bar, and a 'SUGGESTIONS' section with a 'suggesti@' logo.

Eleven Ideas to Maintain Your Blog

You get to hear reports about thousands of new blogs getting created almost on a daily basis. Unfortunately, we don’t hear much about the number of blogs that get abandoned before their anniversary is up.

So, the burning questions are as follows:

- Why do so many blogs get abandoned?
- What could we do to ensure that we are able to maintain a successful blog?

I thought about this topic for a while and also talked to many successful bloggers who have maintained blogs for more than a year now. I have come up with a few ideas for you to consider:

1. Make a long-term commitment.

Don't start a blog because one of your friends started one. Like many things in life, starting a blog is way easier than maintaining it. You need long-term commitment to make it successful.

2. Write what you are passionate about.

One easy option to start a successful blog is to imitate someone else. That will yield short-term results. You can't imitate someone for a long time. Best is to find your own voice. If you are writing about something that you are passionate about, you may not run out of ideas to blog. Find your own voice and stick to it.

3. Pick your audience.

Unless you are extremely accomplished or a celebrity, attempting to write something that is applicable to everyone may be futile. How about picking an audience to whom you can add the highest value?

4. Respect your audience.

Anyone who reads your blog is investing their most precious asset—their time. If you focus on ROI (return on investment for an interaction) for every visitor to your blog, chances are that they will come back for more. If you don't, there are so many choices that are out there as an alternative to reading your blog.

5. Observe and listen.

The more you observe and listen, the better your writing will be. There is always a lot of focus on "doing" things that sometimes we forget to think, observe, and listen.

6. Participate in a conversation.

The blogosphere is the biggest conversation marketplace. It's like a big party going on all the time. You need to be willing to participate in an ongoing conversation or start your own.

7. Check your ego.

Blogging many times is a spontaneous expression of your ideas, thoughts, or insights. It is possible that you will make a mistake, and it is also possible that somebody will roast you for that mistake. Rather than trying to defend it endlessly, try to admit your mistake and go on. Ego won't help you get far, at least in the blogosphere.

8. Ask.

Sports people have been working with coaches for years, and we know that works very well for them. Coaching works in other areas, too. If you are getting stuck somewhere, go ahead and ask someone who might offer you some help. I have always believed that there is more help than we will ever need in this universe. It is the asking that is lacking. The important point is to remember that while you might get something for free, not everything is available for free. You should be willing to pay the price to win the prize.

9. Build on a theme.

When I started blogging about 11 months ago, I created a series based on a theme called “Ways to Distinguish Yourself.” Of course, I blog on topics other than this, but having a theme helped me structure my thoughts over the long run. In 11 months, I have only 87 entries in this series, but in the back of my mind, I am always thinking, observing, and discussing ideas that can contribute to this series. You can pick your own theme or series, and the beauty of this approach is that you can later enhance and reuse the content for something else.

10. It’s not the quantity but the quality.

Many people tell me that they don’t want to start blogging because there is no way they will have time every day to dedicate to blogging. There seems to be some misconception. There is no rule anybody has set that requires you to blog every day. However, it will be unlikely that you will get a lot of visitors if you blog once a quarter. Pick a frequency that will let you blog without diluting the quality of the blog. Ultimately, it’s not the quantity but the quality that matters.

11. Keep growing.

This is something that is outside your blog. One of the ways you can get more attention to your blog is from what you do outside your blog, really! You can get famous through your blog, but it’s easier the other way around—meaning you can get famous outside, and then it’s easier to get your blog to become famous.

Eleven Ideas to Kill Your Blog

If one of the main reasons you started blogging is because it’s easy to start one, by now you already know that it is a lot of hard work to maintain one. The availability of blogging technologies makes it easy to start a professional-looking blog in a few minutes. My friend Dave Taylor [at www.intuitive.com/blog] says that *a blog is nothing but a personal content management system*. A good content management system provides excellent support to manage content.

A blog is only as good as the content within it. While it takes time and effort to build a great blog, it does not take a lot of effort to kill one. Here are some ways:

1. Focus too much on the form and not the content.

Blogging engines are very sophisticated now. You can customize and enhance the look and feel of your blog endlessly, even when you don’t have a programming background. In other words, you can get carried away with the form and not focus on the content. Having a great format is like having an attractive store in a mall. You can get people to walk in, but if the goods inside the store are not attractive, no one will buy anything.

2. Have too many ads.

Of course, making money may be one of your motives. However, there are very few people who are making a ton of money on ads on the blogs. You can try to be one of them, or you can focus on other kinds of leverage from your blog. Now, on a lighter note: Think about it for a second. The way you make money on an ad is when a person clicks on the ad and goes away from your blog. Do you want to take money to send people away from your blog? Of course, ads in moderation may be a good idea. Excessive ads are also a distraction. You don’t want your audience to search for your content among the ads.

3. Steal content.

Stealing is probably a strong word, but if you pick up content from another place and post it on your blog without proper attribution, technically it is stealing. Sooner than later, people will figure that out. Stealing may be more harmful than helpful.

4. Lack focus.

Unless you are a celebrity or a recognized thought leader, you may not get a license to just dish out opinions on everything under the sun. The best would be to focus on a subject where you are an authority or on the way to becoming an authority. This will help you to focus your message to an audience and build credibility among them. On the other hand, once you lose focus, you will start losing your audience too.

5. Don't respect your readers.

John Maxwell said it brilliantly: "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." The key reason your blog exists is because there are some readers reading it. If you don't want readers, you might as well write your thoughts in a diary. Assume that your readers are intelligent and engage with them in a conversation or risk losing them forever.

6. Don't build enough credibility to back up whatever you are saying.

You can say whatever you want on your blog (and say that it is your right of speech). However, if you don't have the credibility and qualification to say whatever you said, very soon people will start losing respect for you as a person. After a while, the blog won't matter anymore. Maintaining a blog is hard not because writing is hard. It is hard because you have to be constantly growing outside your writing for your blog to have a meaning.

7. Have a bad attitude.

Did you know that you can get angry on your blog? You can. But should you? Your attitude shows up on your blog. If your intention is anything less than genuinely helping your audience with their concerns, you need to revisit your blog objectives. Bad attitude is bad on or off the blog. That's the fastest way to alienate yourself.

8. Lack relevance.

You can have a great focus but not be relevant to your audience. My favorite metric is ROI (return on investment for an interaction). Does your blog provide the right return on the investment of their time in reading it? If not, remember that your audience can run away from your blog in a heartbeat. They can substitute your blog with some other blog that provides a better ROI.

9. Attack someone needlessly.

Blogs provide you a lot of power only until you misuse it. You've got to pick your battles in your blog (and in your life). You can attack someone. If the person counterattacks, you enter into a battle. Do you have the luxury of time to engage in this battle? Is that the best use of your time? Why do you think your audience would want to be spectators in this game between you and someone else? When the personal gain from the blog far exceeds the gain by your audience, there will be a problem. Actually, a *big* problem.

10. Create controversy without basis.

They say that if you want to appear intelligent, you should keep making controversial or contradictory statements. The keyword here is “appear” and not “be.” You can catch someone’s attention by creating baseless controversy, but you can’t hold on to that attention. If you do this more than once, you will get an entry into the “Cry Wolf Club,” and no one will bother to listen, even when you have something substantial to share.

11. Engage in excessive self-promotion.

Self-promotion, a bit here and a bit there, should be OK. If you make this your personal achievement newsletter, people will get ticked off. Nobody has time to read about someone endlessly talking about what they have done in their life. Creating a blog that provides great value will lead to enhancement of your brand, which I think is better than self-promotion.

Owning Your Words

Owning your own words covers a lot of ground in the blogosphere. It means being responsible for what you post and for comments. But the first step to owning your own blogging words is making them worth owning. That means finding the right words to get your ideas across with some zip and dash, and properly making use (at least nearly all the time) of punctuation, grammar, and spelling.

Now before you fall completely asleep at the thought of dangling participles, piercing pains of punctuation, and the tepid joys of manual spell-checking, hang on. This is the blogosphere, and we are not going to go there! Not that the mechanics of good writing aren’t important—they are. But there are better, more Internet-style ways of doing things than pounding a copy of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* into your left ear. Here, we’ll look at three easy Internet ways of writing better posts.

Progress isn’t made by early risers. It’s made by lazy men trying to find easier ways to do something.

—Robert Heinlein, *Time Enough for Love*

The Its/It’s Bookmarklet

I guess I skipped out of elementary school the day Mrs. Kincaide drove home with a ruler-hand slap the difference between the possessive form of it and the contraction of it is, because it has never really stuck. In fact, it has often come unstuck when I’m firing off a quick post.

Fortunately, fellow blogger and blogging book author⁶ Andy Wibbels has created an its/it's bookmarklet. It looks like a bookmark or favorite in your web browser's toolbar, but when clicked, it runs a tiny JavaScript applet to remind you of the differences between these two words, as shown in Figure 9-5.



Figure 9-5. *Its/it's bookmarklet*

Installing this bookmark is a snap: Just drag it from <http://andywibbels.com/post/1217> onto your browser's bookmark or favorites toolbar.

Firefox 2.0 Spell Checks

If for some reason you have not yet upgraded to Mozilla Firefox 2.0 (or later), or still use that other web browser, here's one must-have feature: Microsoft Word–like spell-checking built in for any and all text fields. So whether you're writing a post in Blogger or leaving a comment, Firefox 2.0 and later will at least make it easy to catch the spelling goofs.

This is one of those blindingly obvious-in-retrospect features you won't want to part with after five minutes' use.

In case you're wondering, Firefox can be downloaded for free from www.mozilla.com/firefox.

Writing Happiness with WhiteSmoke

Up until a week ago, if you had told me there was software out there that could actually improve your writing, not just fix the misspellings and tidy the grammar, I would have said "No way!"

Yes way! It's called WhiteSmoke (www.whitesmoke.com), available for between \$59.95 and \$99.95 USD in a number of versions both online and off, and it works.

Let's say you're writing a post online (you could also be using Microsoft Word, Outlook, or virtually any other program), and you decide to improve what you're writing with WhiteSmoke. You hit F2, and the WhiteSmoke window pops up with your text (or you can copy and paste text into it), as shown in Figure 9-6.

WhiteSmoke handles your spelling and trickier grammar well, but where it shines is helping you improve your word choice (the words highlighted in blue). In the example in Figure 9-6, after I fix the *a* that should be *an*, I see replacement words and relevant adjectives or adverbs for the word *example*. Two clicks later, WhiteSmoke has replaced *example* with *practical illustration*, as shown in Figure 9-7.

6. Andy's *BlogWild! A Guide for Small Business Blogging* (Portfolio, 2006) is an excellent how-to book for bloggers and highly recommended (after you finish *this* book, of course).

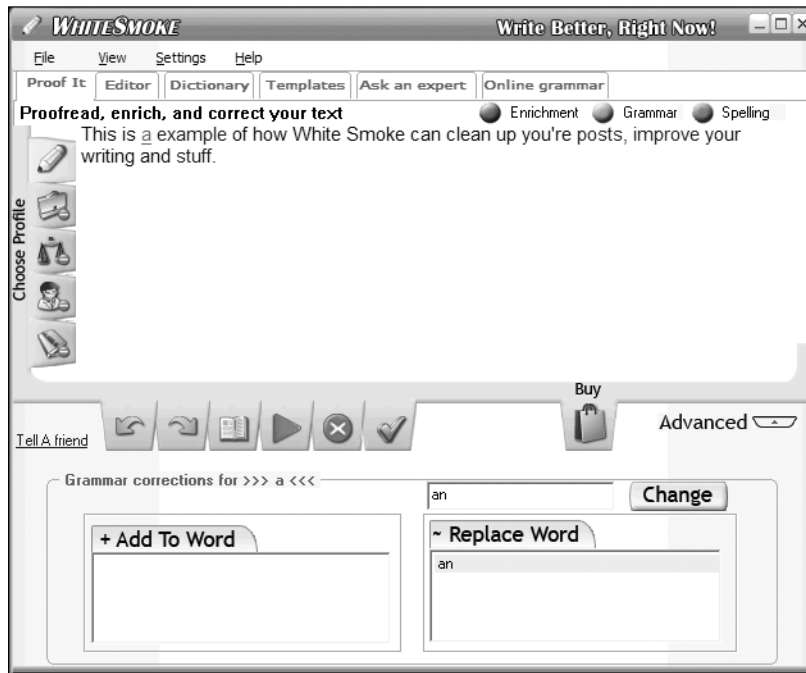


Figure 9-6. WhiteSmoke marks errors.

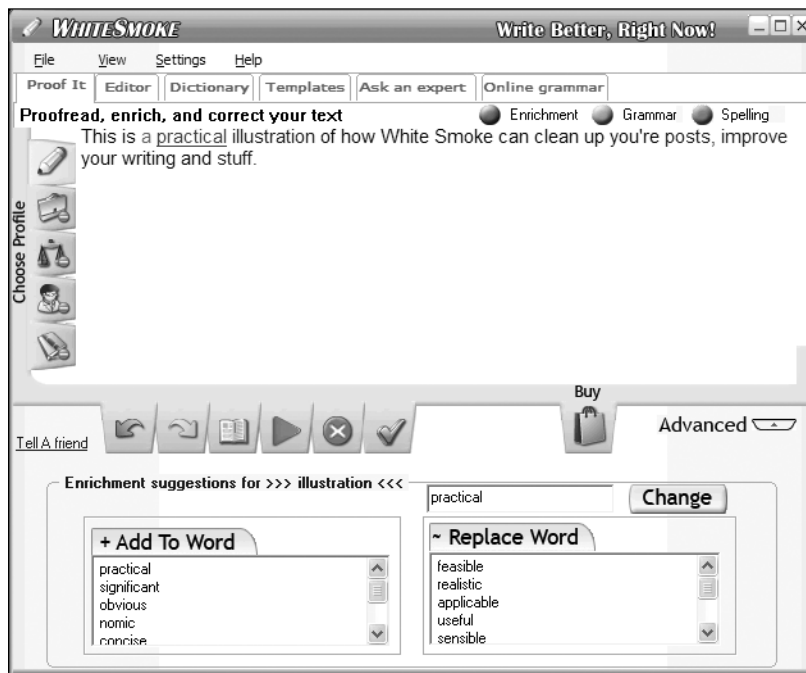


Figure 9-7. WhiteSmoke makes changes.

The magic behind WhiteSmoke, according to Elan Nahari, WhiteSmoke's Sales Director, is an artificial intelligence (AI) system that drives both a context-sensitive thesaurus (replacement words) and "enriches" your text with a list of relevant adverbs and adjectives. So it can help you make better word choices, as well as correct your spelling and grammar.

There are a few things to note about WhiteSmoke. One is that the application sends your text automatically to the WhiteSmoke's AI system, so if you happen to be blogging behind the federal firewall at the National Security Council on the next National Intelligence Estimate, this is not software you should use. Secondly, for the same reason, you need to be connected to the Internet while using WhiteSmoke. Lastly, as keen readers will have noticed, WhiteSmoke missed a couple errors in my example in Figure 9-6: a *you're* that should have been *your* and *White Smoke* as two words. You still need to proofread what you write to catch the occasional leak.

Since "enriching" your word choices depends heavily on context, there are no less than eight different versions of the software: basic, business, legal, medical, creative writing, executive, and the intriguing dating versions, plus a comprehensive license.

WhiteSmoke has several other features: various template libraries, the ability to hook up with a live online writing tutor through the application, and an unfinished as of version 1.0 quick online proofreading service.

If you're just not comfortable with the whole writing end of blogging, WhiteSmoke is definitely worth a look.

HOW TO WRITE COMPELLING BLOG POSTS, BY B.L. OCHMAN

Blogger, social media strategy consultant to Fortune 500 companies, and sought-after corporate speaker B.L. Ochman (www.whatsnextblog.com) has a knack for creating posts that get mentioned far and wide in the blogosphere. Here, from one of her posts at <http://marketingprofs.com> (reprinted with permission), is how she does it.

Blog Style Guidelines

Writing blog posts and comments on blogs is actually very simple. The basic guidelines: keep your copy lively, factual, tight, clear, short, and search-engine optimized.

Here are basic blog style guidelines to follow:

- **Adopt a direct style.** Declarative sentences are good. Web readers demand them.
- **Link like crazy.** One thing that distinguishes blog posts from dead-tree journalism is that bloggers link prodigiously. Link to any other blog or website you mention. Link to articles, books, products, bios, explanatory materials on other sites, and anything you mention in your blog. Always link to information that clarifies or gives background on information and opinions in your post.
- **Write less.** Omit all unnecessary words. The best advice I ever got about writing was from my first boss, the late "press agent" Leo Miller, who taught me a game to play with sentences. He'd keep taking out words until removing one more word destroyed the meaning of the sentence. Aim at keeping your posts at about 250 words.

- **Write good headlines.** Most people use a news feeder like NewsGator to scan blog headlines. They decide after seeing the headline to click into the post. Tell as much of the story as you can in the headline:

Before: Pakistan: NA body on S&T meets [Huh? Who's NA? What's S&T?]

After: Pakistan National Assembly Calls Water Resource Problems the Nation's Major Issue

Before: The B. B. King Book

After: I'm Writing The B. B. King Biography

- **Keep sentences and paragraphs short.**
- **Don't take yourself too seriously.** Blogging isn't brain surgery. Don't get pompous or dictatorial.
- **Never lose your sense of humor.**
- **Write like it counts.** "No matter what your audience size, you ought to write as if your readership consisted of paid subscribers whose subscriptions were perpetually about to expire. There's no need to pander. Compel them to re-subscribe," said Dennis Mahoney on A List Apart.
- **White space is your friend.** It makes reading from the screen easier. Nothing is harder to read than a solid block of copy on a computer screen.
- **Use the simplest possible word and sentence structure.**
- **Read your post out loud** and make sure you don't get stuck on complex construction. If you trip on a word in the midst of reading a sentence aloud, rewrite the sentence.
- **Forget what you learned about business writing in school if you graduated before 1990.** Go ahead! Start sentences with "and" or "but." Don't be afraid to break archaic rules. But, jeez, follow all grammatical rules that provide clarity to your content.
- **Cardinal Sin:** Say "This is about *me*," never "This is about myself." Same with "you" and "yourself." Stiff, formal writing is only for lawyers. And you know what Shakespeare said about *them*.
- **Use bulleted points whenever you can.**
- **Use subheads** every few paragraphs, even in a 300-word post.
- **Use bold text and italics for emphasis on words and phrases.**
- **Make sure your posts are easy to scan.**
- **Choose your voice and keep it consistent.**
- **Don't be afraid to voice opinions.**
- **Ask these questions to yourself before hitting Publish:**
 - Is the topic clear to someone who reads only the headline?
 - Does the lead paragraph tell who and what the story is about and why the reader should care about it?
 - Is the angle you've used likely to seem newsworthy?
 - Would someone who knows absolutely nothing about this topic understand this post?

Is the post free of jargon?

Is it written in journalistic style and does it make an effort to be objective?

Have you peppered the headline and the post with keywords and phrases that will be attractive to search engines?

How to Write Comments on Blogs

Some blogs are more influential than others, and many are trolled by journalists and your potential clients who are seeking ideas, trends, and sources. Commenting intelligently on blogs, even if you don't have a blog of your own, can be a very good way to build a reputation as an expert in a field.

The key is to provide useful, factual information so that over time it becomes clear to other readers of the blogs to which you post that you know what you are talking about. In general, it is a good idea to keep your posts short and on point.

Since blogs are archived online, anything you write in a comment will be there until forever. So think before you write; and edit, edit, edit before you hit Submit.

Blog Comment Guidelines

It is necessary for you to sign your comments. In most cases, anonymous messages will not be published. You're also generally asked for your email address and your URL.

A signature that looks like an ad will simply be cut. Stick to the facts about what you do. The quality of your comments will prove your expertise.

Because of comment spam, many bloggers ask you to register or to have a TypePad key.

If you have a business connection to a product or service mentioned in the blog post, this should be clear to anyone reading your comment.

Comment only when you feel you can offer something of value that is relevant to the types of issues that are discussed.

Size constraints make space limited, and bloggers may shorten your comments. Better to simply write shorter.

Bloggers are free to reject inappropriate posts, including overt solicitations and personal attacks.

When quoting material, strive for accuracy and note where you have omitted copy; provide attribution for the quote, including source and URL (if available).

Tagging Your Ideas

Tags are half of a global navigation system that drives the blogosphere, and if you don't understand how tags work and how to use them judiciously, you're going to regret it. The concept is simple: You, or your blogging platform, need to add a handful of descriptive words or short phrases to each post that serve as links to other, similarly tagged posts.

Why? Because like any huge collection of information, the blogosphere needs some sort of classification system to make it possible to find things by subject. And since no one is going to do it for you, you're elected to the job.

There are actually two kinds of tagging out there in blogland: tagging your own posts, and tagging posts and websites of other people you find interesting and useful. We'll look at each in turn, and how to conjoin the two to raise your blog's prominence.

All Roads Lead to Technorati

We talked at length about Technorati in the previous chapter, and here it is again. The truth of the matter is that when it comes to tagging your ideas, it's all about creating links to Technorati.

When you write a post and tag it, either you or your blogging software create links (like <http://Technorati.com/tag/GTD> `rel="tag"`) to Technorati's index engine, as shown in Figures 9-8 and 9-9.



Figure 9-8. Technorati tags in a post

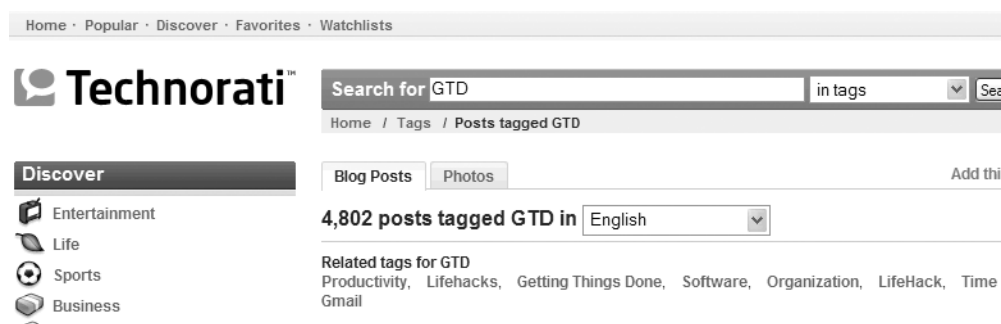


Figure 9-9. Tags lead back to Technorati's index.

Tag Support

In the bad old days of blogging (say, 2005), if you wanted to add tags to your post, you would need to write your own HTML to create tags. Increasingly, blogging systems have automated the process for you. Here's the tagging situation (as of this writing) for some of the major blogging platforms out there:

Blogger: Like a lot of advanced features, built-in support for tagging is not provided by Blogger, but there are ways around that:

- Use Ken Dyck's XBlogThis! (www.kendyck.com/2005/08/xblogthis-extended-blogthis-button.php) to add tags.
- Download Microsoft's free Windows Live Writer from <http://windowslivewriter.spaces.live.com>, which you can use to post to Blogger.
- Get Frank La Vigne's free Windows Live Writer Technorati Tag Plug-in (<http://franksworld.com/blog/archive/2006/09/19/4225.aspx>).

WordPress: WordPress’s categories are automatically used by both the hosted and self-hosted versions of this popular blogging software, making it a matter of a few clicks to properly tag a post. For more on this, see Tom Raftery’s post “WordPress Categories, Technorati Tags and Search Engine Optimisation” (www.tomrafteryit.net/wordpress-categories-technorati-tags-and-search-engine-optimisation).

TypePad: In August 2006, TypePad made it a snap to add Technorati tags to each and every post, but you need to customize your Compose screen in TypePad to enable this feature. Check the TypePad Knowledge Base (search for “technorati” and the “Using Technorati in TypePad” article) or just click the “Customize the display of this page” link at the bottom of the Compose page.

Vox: Tagging support is built in. Just enter your tags in the Tags field.

If your blogging software hasn’t automated the process of creating tags, here are a few websites that, for one reason or another (marketing their services, making a political statement, and so on), will create the code for you:

- Fintan Darragh’s Technorati Tag Generator (www.marketwest.co.uk/tools/index.php) is quick and easy to use.
- Free Tag Generator & Social Bookmark Link Creator (www.evilgeniusmarketing.com/ice/tag-generator.cfm) is a tool I’ve used often, but it can get overwhelmed by would-be users.
- Life in Bush’s America Technorati Tag Maker (www.speciousreasoning.com/tags) has a definite political point of view, along with an easy-to-use tag-generator form.

Keep in mind these kinds of sites come and go. Googling “generate technorati tags” will probably help you find new and better sites.

Tagging Guidelines

Here are a few suggestions for adding tags:

Double-check your spelling. Tags, unlike search engines, are unforgiving when it comes to misspelling. For example, the tag `micrsoft` leads to all of 18 posts; `microsoft` finds more than 61,000.

Short is better. Tags should be one or two words.

Test your important tags. Odds are you’ll end up with a handful of tags you use over and over. Take the time to try out these tags at Technorati and check out alternative tags Technorati shows as related. Take another look at Figure 9-9 to see what I mean.

Multiple tags are good. Categorizing a post with multiple tags improves the chances of your tag being found.

Tag baiting is bad. Tag baiting—using popular tags like `sex`, `free`, and `Britney Spears`—is a sure way to drive all your blog’s readers far, far away. Your tags must be relevant.

Tagging Other People's Blogs

Another kind of tagging commonly happens in the blogosphere: tagging blogs, posts, and websites you think are particularly good and that you want to share with others. This is the kind of tagging that drives highly popular sites like del.icio.us, Digg, reddit, and a few hundred other Web 2.0 sites.

Having your blog or website show up on the front page of any one these social bookmarking sites will bring anywhere from hundreds to tens of thousands of new readers to your blog. And, of course, there's nothing that says you can't nominate your absolute best posts to these sites as well.

A Tasty Bit of Del.icio.us

One of the oldest and possibly the best known of the social bookmarking sites is <http://del.icio.us>, now owned by Yahoo (www.techcrunch.com/2005/12/09/yahoo-acquires-delicious). By using del.icio.us's handy browser tools, it's easy to tag a post you like to your del.icio.us account, where it's automatically shared.

Del.icio.us has made it easy to add a bit of code to your posts so others can add you to their del.icio.us bookmarks or network of favored users. After getting your free del.icio.us account, have a look at its Settings section for more information on Network Badges, link rolls, tag rolls, and daily blog posting.⁷ This last item, daily blog posting, is a very valuable blogger tool. Using it, you can have del.icio.us generate a post for you of what you've bookmarked and why, like the post at Steve Rubel (Micro Persuasion) shown in Figure 9-10.

links for 2006-10-04

- [On Black](#)
View your Flickr photos on a gorgeous plain all-black or all-white background.
(tags: Photography Flickr)
- [Google Operating System: Hidden Labels in Gmail](#)
(tags: Gmail)
- [Wired News: Axing the Podcast Middleman](#)
"A litany of startup companies are working just as hard to remove the iPod and even the computer from the podcast equation."
(tags: Podcasting)
- [Marketing.fm » Mobile Friendly Websites: 10/3 Update](#)
"An updated list of some great websites designed specifically for your blackberry, pda, or mobile phone web browser:"
(tags: Mobile)

Figure 9-10. Links posting from del.icio.us

Depending on how you want to run your blog, you can create your bookmark posts in two ways:

- Let del.icio.us create these posts daily as you add bookmarks.
- Take the time to first bookmark interesting sites within your web browser, then work through them in a batch and post them as a group to del.icio.us to generate a regular feature for your blog.

7. You can also find an excellent step-by-step post about setting up del.icio.us tagging written by Lee LeFever at www.commoncraft.com/archives/001028.html.

Using Digg and reddit

Another way of raising your hand in the blogosphere is adding Digg and reddit “badges” to your posts so users of those two popular sites can vote with one click for your post. My online friend Dharmesh Shah at <http://onstartups.com> has used this and other techniques he talks about to build a considerable readership, as shown in Figure 9-11.

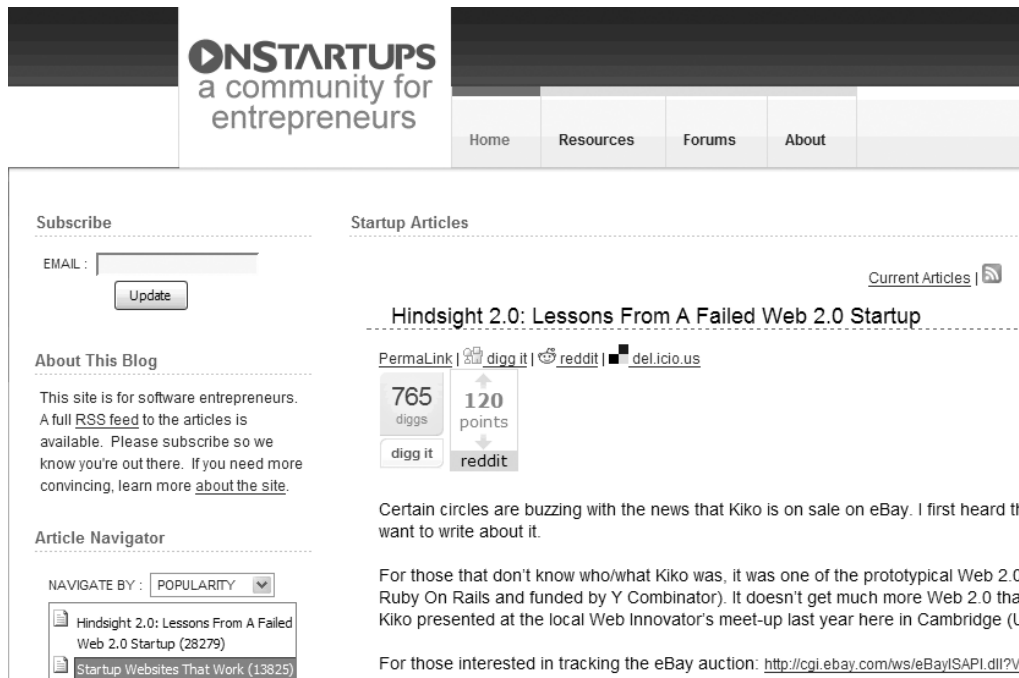


Figure 9-11. *Digg and reddit badges at work*

The drill is essentially the same for both sites: open a free account, and then visit <http://digg.com/tools/integrate> and <http://reddit.com/buttons>.

Socializing Your Blog

As you may have noticed as you’ve visited blogs, “socializing” blogs can run from making it easy to tag your post at one or two sites to hundreds of different sites. There’s a definite trade-off between making it easy to get noticed and making your blog ugly. And there’s the time factor—while users of, for example, WordPress can use any one of a number of plug-ins to make this happen automatically (such as shown in Figure 9-12), it can be a real pain to do manually if that’s what your blogging software requires.

Where there’s pain in the blogosphere, there’s someone taking it away. If you want to socialize your blog to the max but don’t want dozens of little links littering each post, have a look at Socialize-it (www.socialize-it.com). You add one small attractive badge, and when clicked, your readers can add your blog to any and all of the social bookmarking sites shown in Figure 9-13.



Figure 9-12. Automatically socializing a post

Most Popular



List of social bookmarking services



Figure 9-13. Socialize-it.com condenses all these bookmark links into one.

Being a Successful Blogger

Succeeding as a blogger is a lot like succeeding at most things in life: It will take time, it will take effort, and it may even take a little luck. But by structuring your blogs, taking the advice of the bloggers mentioned here, and tapping the power of social networks, you can stack the deck heavily in your favor.

One of the questions most often posted by new bloggers is, “How often should I blog?” You can find all sorts of subjective answers to this, from whenever you have something to say to very formalistic approaches. In November 2006, David Sifry, CEO of Technorati, found something like an objective answer to this question: The most influential bloggers on average post nearly twice a day, and have been doing so for months, if not years (<http://technorati.com/weblog/2006/11/161.html>).

HOW TO WRITE A BLOG POST, BY SETH GODIN

Here's a November 2006 post by Internet marketing guru Seth Godin, where he spells out his recommended way of how to write a great post (reprinted with permission):

Do it like this: Joel on Software [www.joelonsoftware.com/items/2006/11/21.html].
An appropriate illustration,
A useful topic, easily broadened to be useful to a large number of readers,
Simple language with no useless jargon,
Not too long,
Focusing on something that people have previously taken for granted,
That initially creates emotional resistance,
Then causes a light bulb to go off
And finally,
Causes the reader to look at the world differently all day long.

Your Action Tasks

Here are a few steps for blogging successfully:

What's the beat? What is your blog about? Or put another way, what things rock you, get your attention, and move you to write? The sooner you define your core beats, the less chance you'll alienate some of your readers before you find your focus.

Set up your blog radar. Whether you use your Google homepage, Pageflakes (www.pageflakes.com), or Protopage (www.protopage.com), you want to build something that lets you track your beats on a daily basis.

Theme your blog. Structuring your blog moves it from the realm of walking a tightrope above the alligator pit to integrating blogging into your professional life in at least a somewhat predictable way.

Read for results. One of the best ways of learning how to write well is to read well. Find posts that make you think, "I wish I'd written that!" and try to figure out why that post rang your bell.

Once you've taken those first steps, it's time to crank up the volume:

Listen to your FeedBurner feedback. FeedBurner has been covered in detail elsewhere. The point here is that you need to regularly review which of your posts have the most impact and readers, and why.

Get social. Making it easy for your readers to add your posts to their social bookmarking picks is only the start. After surveying all the social bookmark sites out there (you can find a very long list at www.socialize-it.com), decide in which ones you want to be active and get known.

