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Getting started Blogging (and Branding)
by David Cohen, Founder, Equation Arts, LLC

Here are some reminders to help you get started with your first blog, and some tips to help support your brand:

Think "Themes".
Before you start writing, think about what you want your blog (or weblog) to be about.   If you want your blog to support your branding it shouldn't simply be an online diary. Unless you're a food critic you won't build your reputation by telling people what you had for lunch.

Select a small number of topics to focus on and try to develop a point of view on those topics.   You don't have to be rigid, we are all human after all, and showing a little bit of the person behind the blog is nice once in a while, but the more you develop a sense of identity for the blog, the more likely you are to build a following.

Pick a blogging service.
I use Wordpress.com – it is easy to use and it is free (although you can upgrade to some premium features). I get by with the free features quite happily. Other popular services are TypePad.com, Blogger.com, Blogspot.com, and LiveJournal.com. There are scores of others, many are free or have a nominal monthly fee, and most offer premium upgrades (for a price) if you need things like extra storage space or want to hide the ads that support the free services.

For the web savvy you can also host your own blog by installing software on a web server. Common solutions include Wordpress, MovableType, Drupal, and Joomla. These allow you more options, but you also have to maintain more code. Again, there are lots of other options in this category. Finally, you can blog via social networks such as Facebook, MySpace, or Ning.

Set up your blog.
If you go with one of the more popular services like Blogger or Wordpress it is very easy. Don't be intimidated – legend has it that the developer of Wordpress used his mother as his usability expert. If she couldn't figure out the user interface he would rewrite it until it made sense to her. That's a good son.

What about "About"?
Most blogging services and software let you setup an "About" page. Don't skimp on this important step for your personal branding.   This is a good place to put a headshot if you are so inclined, and to tell a little bit about yourself and, of course, your business. Include links to articles you've written and to your company website, etc.

Write your first post.
Yikes! Relax, make it easy on yourself, start with a short post welcoming your new readers and mentioning some of the themes you intend to cover in future posts. About a paragraph or two should do just fine. Whew! That wasn't so bad, was it?

Dress it up.
Now that you have a little bit of content it is time to add a little style. Once again, think "Theme," only this time "theme" refers to the style variations that the online blogging services make available to their subscribers. From your admin panel (a.k.a. dashboard) you should have options to choose different themes, which can be used to quickly change the style (a.k.a. "look and feel") of your blog. Some themes allow you to pick color variations, and upload custom images, a few even allow you to change CSS (a web designer's code thing) for even more control of the look. Premium services and self-hosted blogs give you the most control allowing for fully customized blogs that can match your company website (but you might want to hire a designer to do so).

Remember, your blog's look and feel is a reflection of your branding. If you're using your blog to support and reinforce the branding of your business, then you are going to want to choose a look that harmonizes with the rest of your visual brand identity. When in doubt, keep it simple, and try to match the color scheme of your company website, if not the exact style.

Feed the beast.
Before you start to promote your snappy new blog, write a few more posts. Oh sure, if you want to show it to a few family and friends for some friendly feedback, feel free, but hold off inviting the world until you have a few posts under your belt. Why? It will give you a chance to get more comfortable with the tools and, well it just plain looks better. Have you ever wandered into a store with too many empty shelves? It just looks wrong – like they won't be in business for long. The

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same idea applies to your blog. Be patient, get some rhythm to your writing, and then when you have 4 or 5 posts online start doing some promotion.

Some writing tips:
- When in doubt keep it short
- Write what you know about – let others benefit from your knowledge
- Cite your references with links
- Invite questions
- Break up long passages with lists or images
- Pace yourself – don't burn yourself out
- Acknowledge other thought leaders in your subject area (see, you're a thought leader too)
- Don't be afraid to be opinionated – you might have to deal with some negative feedback (and it can get ugly), but you will probably build some supporters and followers as well

Feed the Feeds.
Huh? Okay jargon time: RSS, ATOM, XML – weird initials, yes, but this is where the magic happens, and the great thing is you don't have to know how they work. Basically, your blogging software parcels out your posts via a mechanism called a feed. The feed conforms to a standard, which makes it play nice with things like news readers, the latest web browsers, and all kinds of widgets, gadgets, bloglets and other gizmos out in the wild. They let people subscribe to your feed and they let services and software stay current with you as well.

Your blogging service probably plays nice with services like Ping–O–Matic, which updates various search engines and services to your latest posts. Your blogging software also provides a feed link (often labeled "RSS" or given an orange icon) that can be used with services like Feedburner, and Technorati to promote your site. Okay this is a little advanced, but suffice it to say if you see an option to connect to ping services in your blog configuration this is generally a good thing.

The beast is still hungry.
Blogs are hungry little things, and never truly satisfied. Pace yourself, and try to write on as regular a schedule as is practical. Even a short little post can stave off those hungry little readers… for a little while.

Commune with the Community
If you just want to write for yourself, or just a few friends, then you don't need too much more advice. Just write, and play with the tools, and don't be afraid to experiment a little. The real power of blogs, however, is in their ability to help build communities. Be a good neighbor – if you mention something in one of your posts that comes from another blog, give a link back to that blog. There is a thing called a "Trackback URI", basically a special web address that is generated for each blog post. If you cite someone else's blog post, try to include the Trackback URI – it will notify the owner of the blog you cited, and might just encourage them to come visit (and link to) your site.

Visit other blog sites of interest and within your chosen subject area. Share your thoughts via comments on their blog posts. Don't be pushy. Don't just show up and ask people to visit your site. Participate. Be a good citizen. Add value to the conversations. Get to be known as a polite and useful voice in the community of your subject matter, and in time people will seek out your blog and start adding comments to your writing. There is nothing like the warm fuzzy feeling when someone writes an intelligent comment to one of your posts. Share that feeling with others and you'll get it back too.

Enjoy the ride.
Don't be discouraged if it seems slow to get going. Remember, for every 1 commenter there are likely to be 10 – 20 readers who don't comment. It takes time, and a lot of regular episodes of writing, pinging, visiting and commenting, to start to build a following for your blog, but the benefits are worth it: You now have a platform to share you thoughts, ideas, expertise, and opinions. You now have another way to be found online and found in a context of your own choosing, related to the subject matter that you feel is important.   You now have links back to your company that will help with your search engine placement. You can act as the ambassador for your brand with a growing community interested in your point of view and your recommendations.

Did I mention the beast is still hungry? Keep Writing! ☺

Still need help? Contact david@equationarts.com and we can discuss your web branding needs.