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## Blogs and the Pharmaceutical Industry

*Should Pharmaceutical Companies Engage in Blogging? If so, how?*

By **Denise Silber** and **John Mack**

If you are reading this, you probably are one of the 38% of Internet users who already know what a blog is. And you are in good company. Eight million American adults say they have created blogs. Technorati, the Google of blogs, reports that there are currently 22.6 million of them. With a new blog being created every one or two seconds, there will be approximately 34 million blogs worldwide by the end of 2005.

Surveys by the Pew Internet & American Life Project reported a year ago that blogs had established themselves as a key part of online culture. Blog readership jumped 58% in 2004 and now stands at 27% of Internet users. Five percent (5%) of internet users say they use RSS aggregators or XML readers to get the news and other information delivered from blogs and content-rich Web sites as it is posted online; 12% of Internet users have posted comments or other material on blogs. Still, 62% of Internet users do not know what a blog is (see box for definitions).

### “Killer” Internet Application

Server-based blogging software, which allows ordinary people to create blogs, is the current Internet “killer application.” Blogs require almost no technical knowledge to get started. If you use a ready-made template on one of the free blogging portals, you can get started in minutes.

Why do people write blogs? Because they are practical, low-cost vehicles for self-expression or “citizen journalism,” providing people with common interests, a place to “hold a conversation” and to collaborate. Most blogs allow visitors to discuss topics online with the author and the blog’s visitors. Used in this way, a blog is an example of “social software” that supports the desire of individuals to be pulled into groups to achieve goals.

### Change Agents

A blog is also a powerful communication tool and by extension a change agent. These days reporters at major news organizations pay close attention to bloggers who often “break” major stories before the traditional media (you may recall what an important role blogs played in the last presidential primaries and elections.). Journalists

themselves are now writing their own blogs. An example is Blogging Baghdad, which aims to provide a dynamic look at the story behind the story of covering the news in Iraq. In France, the blog AgoraVox was launched in May as an online “citizen medium” where reporters participate as bloggers. By November, 2004, this blog had 240,000 unique visitors, rivaling or surpassing leading traditional newspapers in France.

### Blogging 101

Whether your company is ready to embrace blogging and produce one, several, or even hundreds of blogs, or is just interested in keeping

#### Blog Definitions

Blog is short for weblog. A weblog is a journal (or newsletter) that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or the Web site.

A blog is basically a journal that is available on the web. The activity of updating a blog is “blogging” and someone who keeps a blog is a “blogger.” Blogs are typically updated daily using software that allows people with little or no technical background to update and maintain the blog.

A blog is a Web site that contains dated entries in reverse chronological order (most recent first) about a particular topic. Functioning as an online journal, blogs can be written by one person or a group of contributors. Entries contain commentary and links to other Web sites, and images as well as a search facility may also be included.

tabs on blogs, you need to understand the essential basics of blogging, including the public’s perception of what a blog should be.

Three technical advantages differentiate blogs from web sites and contribute to their success:

- Easy updating of text, audio (podcasting), and video files (Vlogging), including from a hand-held device (moblogging);
- Potential to reach a large audience, thanks to high search engine rankings;
- Blogs are not only low cost or free: they may generate income through contextual advertising, collection of donations for a cause, referrals, etc.

Blogs can be open or “closed.” Closed means that they are reserved to members of an organization or company: the blog owner creates a blog, determines who can access it and assigns a log-in and password to each of the intended participants. Transforming an open to a closed blog takes literally one click, depending of course on the degree of security required.

### **Pharma and Blogs: Like Oil and Water?**

As readers of *Pharma Marketing News* well know, blogs are effective means of stimulating discussion about pharmaceutical issues and offering a window into public sentiment about the industry.

The pharma industry is concerned about the influence that bloggers may have on public opinion. Billy Tauzin, CEO of PhRMA, the industry’s trade group in the U.S., in comments critical of the need for a new FDA Drug Watch site, said “I’d rather have them (FDA) doing it than some blogger.”

Since then, FDA has backed off from its plans for a Drug Watch Site—mostly due to pressure from the industry—and bloggers will continue to fill the void without any industry countermeasures.

Pharmaceutical PR people, marketers, and even CEOs should take a cue from the media and at least lurk in the “blogosphere” to get in touch with public sentiment toward pharma. What in the blogosphere is worth watching by pharmaceutical marketers?

Start by using a blog search engine, such as Technorati or Feedster. Google has recently entered the game with its own blog search engine (see <http://blogsearch.google.com>). Type in the name of your company, product, or your CEO, and see what appears. You probably will not like what you see!

To keep track of specific blogs, you might consider subscribing to RSS (“real simple syndication”)

feeds of the blogs and using an RSS aggregator to keep track of them. RSS aggregators are set up to periodically check for new items in the feeds you are subscribed to, commonly once every hour. In other words, the news comes to you, rather than you having to go to the news.

In order to win the blogging game, you have to be in the game! Unfortunately, there are very few pharma-sponsored blogs today. This is certainly a missed opportunity. Recently, one of the authors (Denise Silber), presented a workshop entitled “Medical Blogs” at the recent European Medical Portal Conference hosted by DocCheck in Berlin, Germany. Based on this workshop, we present some suggestions on how pharma companies can deploy blogs in the sections below.

### **Collaboration with Health Care Professionals**

Pharmaceutical closed blogs reserved for use by healthcare professionals can be used to facilitate all sorts of collaborative efforts with special groups. This can include working with key opinion leaders (KOLs) to enable discussions between KOLs and pharma employees such as medical liaisons, clinicians and researchers.

Examples of such activities include:

- Presentation of case studies by KOLs with comments and/or questions from physicians
- Reports summarizing sponsored symposia including audio and visuals;
- Summaries of presentations made at medical congresses;
- Publication of bibliographies;
- Publication of product information such as product withdrawals, new approved indications, “dear doctor” letters, etc.
- Surveys

All of the above can be done on one blog, organized by categories or headings. Certain restrictions may apply regarding, for example, the disclosure of off-label information.

### **Employee Blogs: The Secret Pharma PR Weapon**

Usually, pharma companies respond to criticism by issuing press releases from their corporate communication departments. Employee bloggers, however, could be a much more effective means of positively influencing the public’s opinion of their companies and their brands.

“We have clear evidence that consumers and other important stakeholders make decisions about products and brands based largely on what a

company's employees say about them," said Christopher Hannegan Senior Vice President and Director of Edelman's Employee Engagement Practice. "And now blogs provide these same employees with access to a mass audience as never before. So companies need to understand that two powerful forces are beginning to converge in way that will have a direct and growing impact on their business."

According to a white paper by Edelman and Intelliseek, comments by employees are more influential in determining consumer intent to purchase than news stories or advertising about the product (see "[Talking from the Inside Out: The Rise of Employee Bloggers](#)").

Some pharma companies are already using blogs as part of their public relations efforts. GlaxoSmithKline, has a blog in France that reports on results of public debates organized regularly in various locations and venues (see "[GlaxoSmithKline blogs about health to stimulate debate](#)"). This blog is coordinated by the Director of Public Affairs and is supported by GSK's chairman. Thanks to blog technology, visitors can leave visible comments. This kind of interaction with the public is rare for pharmaceutical companies. Moreover, the GSK blog is already well-positioned in search engines. All in all, this blog is a good example of GSK's approach to improving its image (see also "[GSK Strikes Back with a Grassroots Campaign](#)").

Open blogs, in which the employer has little or no oversight or control over comment, is the most common type of employee blog. But what can pharma companies do on an open blog, employee-run or not, without running into regulatory and legal issues? Here are examples of topics suitable for pharma employee blogs:

- Information on emerging diseases from researchers and clinicians;
- Notices of employee volunteers available to the public for charitable events, speaking engagements, etc;
- Responses to customer information needs;
- Comments on career opportunities within the company;
- Information about Patient Association Programs and other charitable activities in which employees may be personally involved.

Employee blogs on these topics could provide a "human voice" for the company. "That voice — the

unfiltered sound of an actual person writing about what she cares about, sounding like herself — is actually the most important way of connecting with customers and partners," says David Weinberger of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, a research program founded to explore cyberspace, share in its study, and help pioneer its development.

Another type of employee blog might be titled "In Our Own Words." This variation of an open employee blog could be designed to address controversial issues that are currently plaguing pharma companies and that are prominently featured and rehashed on blogs critical of the industry.

This type of blog could work like the "In Their Own Words" segment of the NBC Nightly News. The PR department or an outside agency can interview employee volunteers on topical issues and get their frank and open opinions and publish these on the blog. Any editing would have to be approved by the employees first. Employee photos and contact information could also be provided to make it more personal and to encourage feedback.

### **Blogs and Pharma Marketing**

Pharmaceutical marketers may be itching to take advantage of the advertising and "buzz" benefits of blogging. However, attempts to date fall very far off the mark.

Consider [www.cialisblog.com](http://www.cialisblog.com), an ICOS blog about the ED drug Cialis. This blog violates several blogging principles. Most importantly, it lacks a "human voice." Most posts to the blog appear to be company press releases and are signed "Posted by Cialis." This may be an attempt to establish rapport with the brand, but it doesn't work. The second problem is that posts are infrequent. Strangely, some posts are focused on ICOS profit data and have nothing to do with Cialis at all!

If pharma marketers wish to employ blogs for marketing purposes, they need to be more creative. Blogs would be perfect venues for patient testimonials, non-branded disease awareness programs, and even celebrity comments. Now that Jerry Hall has been recruited as an "ambassador" for Levitra, for example, why not have her establish a blog to augment Bayer's "Strike Up A Conversation" campaign?

### **Challenges and Guidelines**

What are the challenges for any corporation thinking of running a blog? The key challenge is adapting to the new mode of communication in

which you are expected to be utterly transparent and to “bare all.”

Pharma companies have significant unique regulatory and legal hurdles to deal with before they can fully support employee or open blogs. For example, blogs typically allow for reader comments, but for regulatory reasons pharmaceutical companies may need to disable this function or at least establish an intermediary review before publication. Pharma companies may also be challenged to review daily posts to blogs in a timely fashion.

According to the white paper by Edelman cited above, organizations should assess their internal culture and determine their vulnerability in the blogosphere. Questions to ask include:

- Are we a “listening” culture?
- Are we open and comfortable with honest feedback, and can we actually handle and manage it?
- How critical is stakeholder management to brand building and corporate reputation?
- Is our company or brand committed to transparency?
- Is our category disproportionately being shaped by external perceptions on the Internet?
- What is the morale, motivation and commitment of our employees?
- Are employees already blogging and what are they saying?

#### **Should Pharma Pass on Blogs?**

Many pharma executives would say “yes.” And, in fact, the health care sector at large has not yet figured out what to do with blogs. But blogs open up many opportunities for the pharmaceutical industry to improve its image through candor—real people talking to customers in their own voice rather than through corporate uni-speak, the corporate “one set of branding words for all.”

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