

(B)log in: Getting connected virtually- A study on blogging with special focus on corporate blogging in India

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The paper describes the new media for external communication and its emerging presence among corporates in India. Corporate blogs are windows that offer direct access to the stakeholders of the business, and, considering the scope of its influence it is important for the corporate blogger to understand the dynamics of the medium before venturing into it.

“I blog therefore I am”

What are blogs?

Blog or weblog is a 21st century internet phenomenon, a form of computer-mediated communication and represents a post modern version of the innate human urge for interactivity, dialogue and community. It is a virtual society on the web. People who share common interests, values, opinions and aspirations use the blog as a platform or arena to engage in conversations. In simple terms blogs are “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence” (Herring et.al.2003) But such a simplistic definition would obscure the dynamic, amorphous and highly inter-textual nature of the blog.

It is generally accepted that the term weblog was coined by weblog writer Jorn Barger in 1997 and the first press mention of the term appeared in 1998 (Jerz 2003). By 2004, the western world had already recognised the great rhetorical opportunity provided by the blog and the medium had evolved from the initial, simple filter-style information aggregator with links to other sites on the web to a more involved forum for personal interaction, intervention and self-expression (Miller & Shepherd 2004). Self expression is the overriding theme of blogs.

Why Blog?

The greatest appeal of the blog is direct communication in an interactive, conversational format. Readers can step in with comments to individual postings. References to other online posts can be made on the blog and links to favourite blogs can be cited in the blogroll. All this makes the blog a richly wired, vibrant and participative space where the blogger can connect with a potentially large, invisible, disparate and globally dispersed audience. A recent technological development that we see in the blogscape is a convergence of media with textual, graphic and video content appearing on the same page giving the reader a holistic, integrated and exciting multi-media experience. Unlike mainstream media the blog is generally perceived as a transparent, less mediated repository of ‘truth’ especially because of its link driven format and the reverse chronological ordering which give a sense of immediacy and hence authenticity to the content (Blood 2002). Like other user generated media practices such as citizen journalism, the blog encourages consumer activism and helps consolidate dissent against any form of tyranny and thus forms another example of a democratising trend in the media today. An interesting ‘public’ event on the net in 2008 was the ‘Blog Action Day’ celebrated on Oct 15th when almost a quarter of the world’s top 100

blogs signed up to participate in a multi-faceted global conversation on poverty. A similar instance of a massive, virtual convergence of voices on the web was witnessed in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami and to quote an example of a current event that has accelerated blog traffic we have swine flu.

Types of Blogs:

Two common types of blogs are personal blogs and corporate blogs. The personal blog is more of a personal diary where the blogger can tell his/her story freely and unabashedly with all the luxury of visual and discursive anonymity. Information sharing, refining of ideas, bringing clarity to ones thoughts, rallying of support, relationship building, opinion formation etc. are just some of the benefits from blogging. Above all the personal blog is cathartic as it affords the writer a cleansing of frayed emotions and a provisional mastery over the self.

The corporate blog is a weblog published and used by an organization to reach its organization goals. It has a public facing window, the external blog through which it interacts with external stakeholders of the organization and an 'inside' forum called the internal blog which serves as a means for interaction among the internal public. Corporate blogs have diversified further into CEO blogs, Industry Authority blog, Department or Product blog, Customer Service blog etc. The corporate blog can be an effective forum for an organization to engage with its multiple stakeholders who are positioned at different orbits within and outside the organization and know their opinions and expectations and increase brand visibility.

Personal Blog vs. Corporate Blog:

The communication solutions that blogs offer in the corporate world are completely different from that provided by the personal blog. Unlike the personal blogger who can speak freely under the cloak of secrecy, the corporate blog must vociferously proclaim its identity in order to benefit from the endeavour. Whereas the personal blogger can be self indulgent and celebrate his personality in his writing, the corporate blog should not serve as mere corporate speak. "Blogs attract visitors when they purposely avoid commercialism and instead deliver compelling and credible content" (PwC). Another major point of divergence between the personal and corporate blog is in terms of the truth value of content. The personal blog can fictionalize, exaggerate and falsify and perhaps it is in this alienation of the 'truth' that the writer achieves

the true purpose of his writing. On the other hand the corporate blog must be completely honest, direct and unequivocal in its expression or else the very purpose of the communication would be compromised. The expectations of the reader are also different in the two scenarios. The reader of the personal blog has no definite expectations or preset bias; he would mostly have strayed onto the blog. The reader of the corporate blog on the other hand is definitely someone who knows the company and seeks to know further about the entity and hence has an interest either positive or negative in it. So it is important for the corporate blogger to understand the dynamics of the medium before venturing into it.

State of the Blogosphere 2008:

Technorati the leading monitor of the world of weblogs in their annual State of the Blogosphere Report 2008 have released figures which indicate that the size of the blogosphere has doubled since 2007. In April 2007 the company had indexed 70 million blogs, while in 2008 the figures had risen to 133 million. "Technorati tracked blogs in 81 languages in June 2008, and bloggers responded to our survey from 66 countries across six continents" (Technorati 2008). These figures are truly representative of the kind of massive global phenomenon that blogging is today.

Segmenting bloggers according to blog type as personal, professional and corporate, the report states: "Four out of five bloggers are personal bloggers who blog about topics of personal interest. About half of bloggers are professional bloggers — blogging is not necessarily their full-time job, but they blog about their industry or profession in an unofficial capacity. 12% of bloggers blog in an official capacity for their company" (Technorati 2008). Corporate blogging per se may be a small wedge in the larger pie, but the question is whether corporates can afford to ignore this communication opportunity.

It is a fact that whether a brand has evolved a social media strategy or not it's most likely to have already made its presence in the blogosphere. "Four in five bloggers post brand or product reviews, with 37% posting them frequently. 90% of bloggers say they post about the brands... that they love (or hate). Company information or gossip and everyday retail experiences are fodder for the majority of bloggers" (Technorati 2008). When companies find themselves referred and queried on the web, it's only rational that they plug in and understand the pulse of the crowd. Clearly

corporates have sensed that blogging is a critical component of the new-age cultural production and they are beginning to realize the need for an effective communication strategy for user generated websites like blogs (Karwal & Chaturvedi 2009).

Corporate Blogging In India:

But this exuberance doesn't seem to reflect in the Indian context. The Indian blogosphere according to the JuxtConsult *India Online 2008* report is estimated to be just 2.8 million. Only 10% of the 35.03 million regular internet users in India in 2008 commented on blogs and only 8% owned a blog site. These figures are nothing much to cheer about. Companies in India are likely to be discouraged by the limited appeal that blogs seem to have in India. It is as if blogs still depend on mainstream media for publicity in India. But despite this general inertia many Indian companies are beginning to post their social footprint on the web (Perera & Raghav 2009).

The Pioneers:

One of the first major Indian corporate to mark their presence on the blogosphere was Tata Interactive Systems (TIS) in September 2005. In the very first blog post which is a brief on their blogging credo, the company makes its intentions very clear: "We think this is the best way to talk to you, to tell you about our culture, our work, our innovations, and the challenges we are working hard to overcome to be the global first choice in learning. We invite you to join us on this journey that we hope will be a frank and open dialogue on issues of mutual interest" (TIS 2005). The TIS blog by directly addressing 'you' the reader sets the tone for a friendly, intimate conversation. You do get a sense of the free and friendly atmosphere in the company from some of the fun-filled posts on the cultural activities, festival get-togethers, training programmes etc. Most of the posts centre around learning solutions which is the core business of the company, but the sheer variety of perspectives that they are able to bring to their theme keeps it lively and interesting. e.g. a post in Nov 2006 titled, *Training goes on a cruise: An interview with Chris Volkle* talks about how to make a learning management system work on a ship while another titled *Cloning Socrates* deliberates on how to bring the personal element into an alienating e-learning environment. Definitely a person keen in the area of learning solutions would be an ardent follower of this blog. But though it is a well managed blog the site has not generated a great deal of bounce. And so the initial

objective of having "a frank and open dialogue on issues of mutual interest" is not fully realised. However in an annual review of the blogging effort posted in Nov 2006, Ankush Gupta who managed the corporate blog at TIS wrote: "I think we have got off to a good start... We have also received some very positive feedback for our photo albums capturing life@TIS, from people considering TIS as a potential employer. I think this is because from the outside, an organization often appears impregnable and this is one of the boundaries that we have been successful in lowering (TIS 2005)." That's a huge bonus for an organization if the blog works as a mirror to reflect its culture and values and thereby act as a talent magnet for the firm.

"Many early adopters of blogs were technology companies eager to leverage a blog's ability to position a company executive as an expert in the industry or on a topic" (PwC). The Infosys blog ushered in with a post by Nandan Nilekani in July 2006 flaunts its leadership in the tech space. In an article titled, 'In a Flat World, Operational Excellence is Strategy,' Nilekani sets the tone for the Think Flat campaign of the Infosys blog which concentrates on "a business world disrupted by the combined effects of growing emerging economies, shifts in global demographics, ubiquity of technology and accountability regulation. (Nilekani 2006)" With contributions from Infosys board members, senior heads and executives the blog serves as a communication vehicle for positioning the company and its employees as thought leaders in the industry. A company spokesperson says, "In this forum, we share our perspectives with our clients and other business professionals. The blog enables us to have a dialogue, instead of simply publishing our perspectives to clients" (Ramalingam 2007). Very professional in its tone, the blog serves the purpose of building relationships with technophiles, educating employees and generating a buzz on new technology and thought. With 27 blogs, each with a clearly defined thematic focus, Infosys has a formidable presence in the blogosphere. Ability to take feedback is a critical component of a company's success with blogging. The very first post by Nilekani received a stinging comment which read: "What a terrible waste of time and storage space...blah d' blah blah about your company...Don't you know what a blog is?" (Nilekani 2006). When the company does not filter out the negative message but faces it fair and square, it adds value to the corporate image as well as enhances the credibility of the blog. A problem with the Infosys blog though is that it is erratically updated. Sometimes

articles follow each other after a day, and sometimes there are no posts for a long interval. Regular updating creates continuity and ensures reader engagement which is so vital to the success of the blog.

Customer networking through blogs:

Another early convert to online initiatives in marketing was Hindustan Unilever Ltd. with its SunsilK Gang of Girls online social networking website launched in 2006. The GoG site open only to girls has various features including blogs. A gang consists of a maximum of 50 members and they can engage in a number of online group activities that would be a source of fun and a venue for emotional bonding in the group. What HUL achieved through this highly creative effort was to establish an online community of involved customers who interacting in a fun filled environment engaged in conversations that provided valuable insights into changing consumer tastes. This turned out to be a highly successful attempt at brand building and differentiation through the use of online tools.

Workplace Branding & Crisis Management through Blogs:

The FritoLay blog offers a totally different experience in blogging with very friendly, intimate conversations that give a sense of the vibrant, "affinity driven culture" at the work place. The blog which calls itself *About the People and Happenings at FritoLay India* is certainly a good example of workplace branding. An interesting use that FritoLay put their blog to was to address the Kurkure controversy in Aug 2008. The company used its blog to communicate its version of the story to the consumers and also address their specific concerns and anxieties. A detailed exposition on the quality of Kurkure is made in a post by the Managing Director Gautham Mukkavilli. Consumers responded appreciatively to the quick response. Wrote a consumer: "Perhaps this is the first time I am coming across a reply from a company on such chain mails. All Kudos to the team in PepsiCo" (Mukkavilli 2008). Such responsiveness to issues can create strong customer relationship and positive word of mouth. But strangely after Dec 2008, the company blog has gone quiet. Shutting down a live communication avenue abruptly without notice does not speak well for the company.

B2B Blogging:

A corporate blog that is remarkable for the sheer consistency and quality of content is the Giftex blog. Started in August 2007, the blog brands itself as "the

best blog on corporate gifting and B2B gifting." True to its claim the messages revolve around the theme of gifting. The blog is updated every single day except the weekends and the content is always related to gifting. It's interesting how the blog comes up with relevant and thought provoking posts that reflect the season. February was about valentine day gifts while May/ June concentrated on gifting to students successful in the exams. The blog is a rich resource of information on gifting practices across the world, gifting do's and don'ts etc. Even without directly talking about themselves, the message of their business is reinforced every single day on their blog (Giftex Blog).

CEO & Executive Blogs:

CEO and Executive blogging is also catching up in a big way in the Indian context. Nandan Nilekani (Infosys), Ajit Balakrishnan (Rediff.com), Sanjeev Bikhchandani (Naukri.com), Rajesh Jain (Netcore), Vineet Nayar (HCL), Arun Natarajan (Venture Intelligence) are some of the high profile CEO bloggers. A blog gives the CEO blogger a chance to connect directly with a wider audience, engage them in friendly dialogue on a range of topics and establish mindshare for their companies. This would definitely enhance the credibility of the CEO in the larger social arena and accrue to the image of his company. Basab Pradhan who until recently was CEO of Gridstone Research wrote a personal blog '6AMPacific' as well as contributed to the organizational blog of Gridstone. While the organizational blog is all about work, '6AMPacific' gives you a slice of the man. There are posts on a wide variety of topics like the swatting flies episode of Obama, a spell bee contest in the US and even one titled 'Rants from Delhi' where he shares his frustration at having to wait at the Delhi airport for a delayed flight to the US. As Deepa Thomas, Corporate Spokesperson, eBay comments: "...a blog by a corporate leader tends to humanise the organization by giving it a face and a name to connect to" (Karwal & Chaturvedi). Moreover by having a personal blog the corporate head can continue to converse with his audience even when his relationship with the organization is ended. So Pradhan, when he quit Gridstone did not have to delink with the network that he had nurtured but could in fact carry the goodwill with him to his next port of call. But a major concern that should bother every CEO blogger is sounded by Bikhchandani in his very first post on his blog 'Wisdom in Hindsight: "I didn't want to start a blog and then not sustain it (Bikhchandani 2007)." 'Blog consistently' is key to nurturing the relationship and keeping it alive and healthy.

International Branding and blogs:

The Mahindra & Mahindra corporate blog offers an example of how blogs can be used to create transparency by bringing internal conversations into the public domain. The latest post in March 2009 presents excerpts from an intranet chat with employees by Mr Anand Mahindra, Vice Chairman and Managing Director, Mahindra Group. The chat demonstrates how the management are tuned in to their workforce and the kind of supportive, mentoring role that the top brass play in the organization. Mahindra & Mahindra have also used blogs as a means of international branding in overseas markets. Their 'Life of a farm' blog is an interesting effort in product branding. It tells the story of Joel Combs, an ordinary Kentucky farmer. Subtly woven into his narrative of farm life are the Mahindra and Mahindra product line and as the reader gets sucked into the story, he also unconsciously adopts the M&M products.

CRM Blogs:

Blogs are invaluable in terms of customer feedback and relationship management. As Jeremy Wright observes in his book *Blog Marketing*: "Customers are your best product managers, your best evangelists, and perhaps the only people in the world who will tell you the truth about your company. Listen to them (Wright 2006)" The Club Mahindra blog is the result of the innate realization that in this net connected world "you are not selling to individual customers but rather to networks of customers." In Dec 2007 barely a month after the blog was launched, the company played host to a team of bloggers who were passionate about travelling. The idea was to get "travel writers, photographers and bloggers (more keen on traveling) experience our resorts and put their views in their blogs?! For one, I was confident of the experience and the service they would derive from the Club Mahindra resorts, and second it would also give us visibility on the Internet" (Club Mahindra Blog). The bloggers wrote of their experiences on their personal blogs as well as posted links to the Club Mahindra blog and thus at one stroke the company generated a huge network of goodwill. The company continues to come up with such innovative offerings to motivate clients to write about them thus creating and nurturing customer evangelist bloggers.

ING Vysya has taken the concept of CRM to the next level through their blog-www.pickyouradvisor.com. On this blog customers can pick an advisor through direct interaction after viewing advisor profiles and testimonials. The idea is to use technology to enable the customer to have greater say in the advisory process, thus making them creators of their product rather than mere consumers. This is a pilot project launched in the Indian market and the company believes "that people will flock to the site in large numbers and experience a new way of engaging with our insurance advisors." Though the idea is only in the test phase, it is another serious attempt to harness the power of blogs for business (Karwal & Chaturvedi , p. 73).

Players in the online recruitment industry like Monster.com and Naukri.com have deployed blogs to connect the two ends of their client spectrum. As Sumeet Singh, National Head of Marketing, Corporate Communications and Strategic Alliances, Naukri.com says: "We realize that social media, because of its time and energy saving attributes, may help the employees to hire, employ the right kind of talent and create a brand through the voice of their employees" (Karwal & Chaturvedi, p.77).¹ Naukri has Recruiter blogs to facilitate conversations between recruiters and job seekers and Product blogs to inform on latest product offerings. In the words of Sanjeev Bikhchandani of Naukri.com: "our best ideas come from our customers - that is to say from recruiters and job seekers... What we try to do is listen, observe and understand – and then join the dots and improve the site in a manner that it works for our visitors better" (Naukri.com Blog).

Industry Authority Blog:

Another interesting type of corporate blog is the industry authority blog, an excellent example of which in the Indian context is 'Emerge,' the blog launched by NASSCOM as a special forum for thought sharing and interaction between SME's in the IT industry. Milagrow has set up the Milagrow Retail blog to deepen engagement within the retail industry and contribute to the knowledge capital. The blog keeps visitors updated on current trends in retail and also consolidates opinion on various issues affecting the industry as a whole. The Milagrow Retail blog positions Milagrow as industry thought leader and offers the added benefit of search engine optimization bringing more traffic to the Milagrow site at no extra cost.

Internal Blogs:

Internal blogs are an excellent knowledge management tool in the organization and many companies have adopted blogs as a means to secure communication within the organization. Internal blogs can be organized around a project and all the people working on the project or interested in it can keep track of it and collaborate efficiently in its progress. It would be more focused and progressive as compared to mere reports on a website. Management can also encourage employees to air their creative ideas on internal blogs so that others reading the posts can contribute to the idea to develop it and make it feasible. This practice would promote simple conversations, creative discussions, team spirit and very importantly foster a sense of pride and personal worth that come from articulating ones voice and ideas. Infosys, TCS, Mahindra & Mahindra, Cognizant and many other leading companies already have a successful blog strategy implemented for internal communication. Explains Mohit Garg, a software professional at Dilithium Networks: “We had set up blogs in one of my previous companies Innoviti Embedded Solutions, the idea being to brainstorm ideas and evolve consensus spanning over days and weeks. It was a start-up and there was a need to document processes, share the management’s vision with employees and share ideas. Different functions – sales, engineering and finance – posted important events, updates and problems for more efficient coordination and finding solutions together.”. For new employees, going through the blog can be a fast track to getting oriented”(Jain 2008).

Social Media & Marketing:

Companies are not merely setting up their own corporate blogs, they are also tuned in to personal blogs and social networking sites to hear the latest buzz in the market. The influence of the internet is maximum in the case of premium lifestyle products targeted at the youth. A team at Bajaj Auto are dedicated to tracking chat room and blog discussions to provide feedback to the company’s marketing and product development group. Some of the popular internet sites and blogs tracked by bike marketers include xbhp.com, mouthshut.com, bikenomads.com, bajajpulsar.org, and yahoo groups for Royal Enfield, Hero Honda Karizma group and TVS Apache (Kant 2007).

Future of Blogging in India:

Does blogging have a future in India? It is a fact that the corporate blogging scene in India is not as vibrant as it should be. According to Puneet Mehrotra of Brandtalk.in, a corporate blogging solutions provider: “Indian companies are not using the new media effectively at all. Most of them don’t even understand its importance” (email interview 2009). One of the reasons for this could be that most Indian companies are culturally unequipped to start a corporate blog. A highly formal, conservative communication style and command and control decision making process does not match with the informality and openness required in the new media. Perhaps that is the reason why more tech companies and start up’s are embracing this technology than traditional established companies (Venugopal 2005). Moreover companies need to discover their own unique voice which they want to communicate to their public through their blog and integrate it with their corporate strategy. Otherwise the whole exercise would be sheer waste of time and may not sustain in the long run.

There are many sceptics who believe that blogging has already been overshadowed by Twitter in terms of popularity. Moreover considering the speed with which people want to get messages across, tweets would be preferred. “Bloggers are turning to active twittering, both as an alternative to posting regularly as well as spreading the message about their blogs.” says Amit Agarwal, who writes a tech blog called Digital Inspiration (Raghav 2009). But he is confident that Twitter and Orkut will complement blogs, not replace them. Blogs have served certain unique purposes too. e.g it is a blog that helped solve a patent dispute between TVS and Bajaj. The judge actually used content from the Spicy IP blog as evidence to arrive at the judgement. This judgement has set a precedent for the future use of blogs in court to track justice (Shanker & Naik 2009). Corporate blogging is still an evolving medium in India. But as Arif Vakil of Vakil Housing puts it, “to make the most of blogging, businesses have to integrate the medium with their corporate culture i.e.be open, friendly and receptive to communication — not merely as a sales and marketing tool and a dumping ground of rehashed press releases” (*Vakil Housing Blog 2006*).

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