

"Search is brand"

A White Paper by Market Sentinel and Weboptimiser showing the challenges posed to brands by search engines and blogging and explaining the tools and techniques companies can use to fight back.

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Executive summary

The rise of blogs and message boards as influential places for customers to seek help on buying decisions, combined with the rise of search engines, poses a serious threat to brands.

87% of the population use search engines as their primary means of finding sites. Search results are increasingly impacted by commentary from message boards and blogs.

In a recent survey of a Google search on the top 50 UK grocery brands, 20 were found to have detractors in the top ten results, including Coca-Cola, Walker's crisps, Lucozade, Mars bars and McCain oven chips. 25 of top 30 FTSE companies were "not easily found" by search. Blogs are increasingly rivalling mainstream media for mindshare. 15 of the top 37 online news sources are blogs. Blog stories have recently had serious consequences for brands – Kryptonite locks recalled their product at a cost of \$10m. New research shows that online recommendation correlates strongly to stock price.

But brands can take action to minimise the risks:

- Auditing and monitoring the threats to their interests
- Ensuring their web presence reflects their message
- Optimising their web presence for usability
- Making their web presence search engine friendly
- Ensuring that "brand detractors" are responded to, or outmarketed
- Creating and optimising a corporate blog
- Using search engines for tactical 'audibility'
- Benchmarking customer loyalty against the competition

If companies use the most recent techniques of online monitoring and search engine optimisation, and if they borrow some of the techniques of the bloggers themselves, they can ensure their own message is clearly heard in the blogosphere and reflected in search results.

Introduction: "Search is Brand"

According to recent statistics, the majority of the UK population (62%) uses the Internet – but not just to buy things. They're using the Internet to find information, to share ideas, to get advice, make new friends and contacts and research their purchases before they buy offline.

With the plethora of forums, bulletin boards and community sites, the advent of blogging and with web design and hosting costs at an all-time low, it has never been easier to have a voice online. The Web is a democracy in which anyone can say

anything to anyone. If you want to complain about a company or its products or services, you can. If you want to spread malicious gossip, you can. If you want to base your search engine marketing campaign on your competitors' brands and trademarks, if you're careful, you can.

And here the problems start.

In a recent Market Sentinel survey of ACNielsen's top 50 UK grocery brands, we found that 40% of them had critical or negative commentary in the top 10 Google results. The brands with critical commentary include Coca-Cola, Walker's crisps, Lucozade, McCain oven chips, Mars Bars and Bird's Eye fish fingers.

ACNielsen rating

	Brand	Google ranking of negative sites
1	Coca-cola	3,4, 7,8
2	Walker's crisps	2
3	Warburton's bakery	9
4	Cadbury's dairy milk	10
7	Kingsmill bread	1,2
12	Lucozade	4
17	Bernard Matthews	5, 9
18	KitKat	10
19	McCain	3
21	Flora	6
22	Fanta	3,6
27	Heinz baked beans	9
28	Mr. Kipling	10
32	Tetley tea	7
35	Dairylea	2,3,4,8,10
38	Red Bull	5,10
41	Bird's Eye fish fingers	1,9
42	Mars bars	4
43	Dolmio sauces	6,10
46	Bird's Eye chicken	2,4,7,8,10

Market Sentinel survey of ACNielsen Top 50 UK grocery brands.
Survey date 6th June 2005

Likewise, here are the top 10 listings for a Google search on 'Coca Cola'.

This has serious implications for PR, corporate affairs and marketing professionals. When people look for you online what they find is part of your brand identity – and can make a vital difference to your overall brand equity. The very fact that these 'brand detractors' can be so easily found on Google is a testament to their importance, particularly when so many companies can't even be found on the search engines under their own brands.

A recent survey by the search engine company Seekport found that 25 of the top 30 FTSE brands: "are not easily found by search engine crawlers, due to fundamental flaws in website design - such as failure to source appropriate keywords on their web pages." Likewise, recent research found that the Google search page for the term "Ford" had more visitors than Ford's own home page. According to a survey by search company iProspect, search engine users typically associate the top search engine positions with the leading brands, so if you can't be seen on the search engines under the search terms that people are using to find you, then someone else, perhaps a competitor or disgruntled ex-employee or customer will take that visibility – and the resulting mindshare.



Blogging and the rise of the detractors

At the same time, the dominance of search as a way of finding brands on the Internet has been accompanied by the rise of blogging.

There are now (as of mid-June 2005) 12.5 million blogs, and the number is rising by 48,000 a day. A weblog – or blog – is really just a simple website which is easy to use and update.

(www.blogger.com is a good example). Blogs are personal websites that are highly dependent on linking for their traffic. Because their currency is opinion, bloggers tend to be more outspoken than other web users.

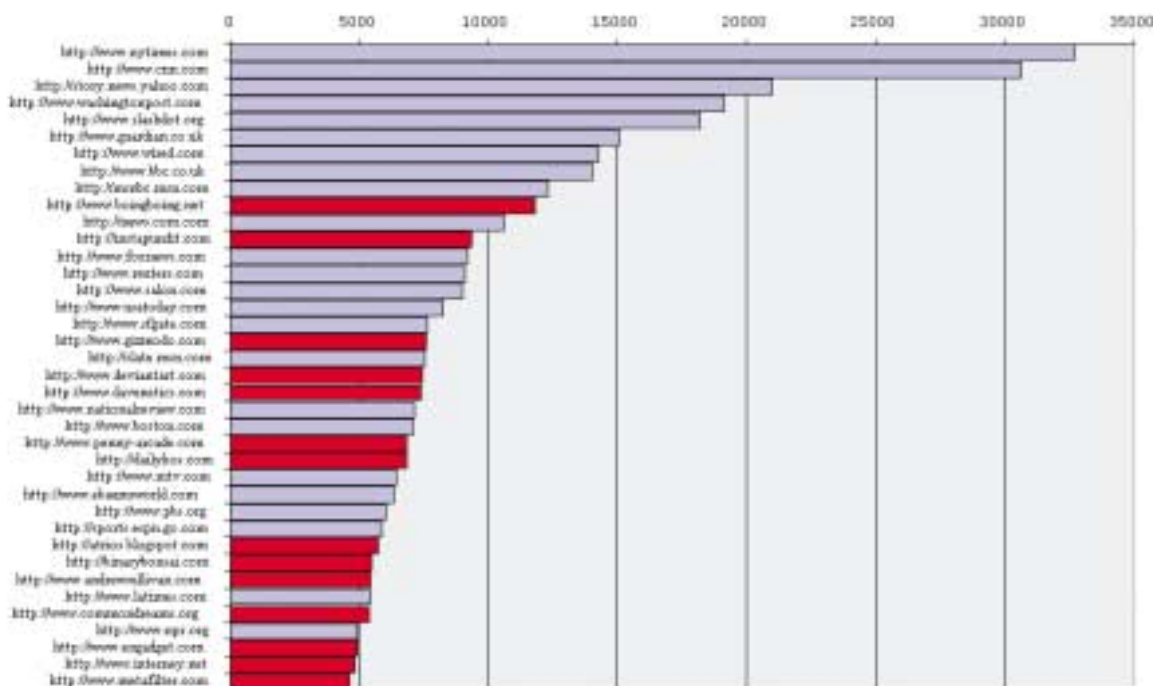
Recently the research firm Delahaye produced some work looking at the proportion of negative commentary on the net. They found that in message boards 11% of comments are negative, in news coverage 13%, but in blogs 23% of all comments are negative.

This has serious consequences because blogs have characteristics which give them a very high impact as far as audibility is concerned. Most blogs:

- are easily indexed by search engines
- have prominent keywords
- automatically syndicate their content to other users

There are estimated to be 900,000 active bloggers in the UK, producing highly-optimised content on a daily basis covering a broad variety of topics. The consequence of this huge growth is that RSS distributed news, and news from bloggers, is increasingly dominating how readers access information.

The blog-monitoring company Technorati recently showed that the unconventional media is catching up the "MSM" (mainstream media) and those sites like Fox News and Reuters are already being out pointed, judged by the number of incoming links to their content. 15 of their top 37 news sources are blogs.



And because blogsites are highly linked, Google loves them. That means that when consumers type the name of your company or brand into Google, they will often see blog results. Of the top ten results which come up when you access Nike in Google, two are hostile to the company on the grounds of its labour practices.

But does it matter?

This kind of commentary can have directly negative effects. In September 2004 US company Kryptonite locks issued a formal denial of a story which had been running in blogs and message boards that their "unbreakable" \$95 locks could be unpicked with a biro. Within days blogger Benjamin Running posted a video of the exploit and the company had to withdraw their product at a direct cost of \$10m. In June 2005 a story on the blog Apple Insider sent the firm's stock price down 5%. Bloomberg – the conventional media commentator – simply reported the story. The impact of Internet commentary is now a daily reality for heads of corporate communications, and brand managers.

As a result, the leading brands are beginning to understand that offline equity doesn't automatically translate into online visibility, and positions

within search engine rankings are highly competitive. They are discovering that negative coverage online does matter. They are discovering that the experience of finding the company on the search engines cannot be excluded from a company's branding, marketing and public relations strategy. In short, if a web site is a PR tool as well as a sales channel, your voice, as well as your shop, online, you need to make sure that you know what the web is saying about you, that you are seen to own your brand online, that you can respond to sudden events, both good and bad, and that you can control the way your brand is perceived by the thousands of people who are both talking about it and looking for it on the Internet.

In this White Paper, we have described some of the ways in which you can harness the very tools that your competitors, customers and prospects are using to get their message across – namely blogs, community sites, news sites and search engines, as the enablers to support and enhance your online public relations strategy. Your PR strategy is between you and your PR company, but over the following pages, we can show you how you can say it more effectively with two cohesive and complementary strategies: search engine optimisation and marketing, and online monitoring and measurement.

Putting search to work

There are a number of ways you can harness the power of the search engines to support your online as well as offline PR strategy:

- Optimising your web site for relevant issues, events and offline marketing campaigns, as well as products, services and brands
- Using both the paid-for and natural listings for long term and short term visibility
- Making your site visitor, as well as search engine friendly
- Making your news search engine friendly
- Ensuring that 'brand supporters' have better search engine visibility than 'brand detractors'

Research first

The first and most important element of an Online PR/SEO strategy is to look at your overall business, marketing and PR positioning. You'll need to establish:

- What is the Web saying about you?
- What do you want to say?
- How are you currently saying it, including offline?
- What events have you got planned (i.e. product launches)
- What issues might effect your reputation?
- And what will your response be?
- How are your competitors positioning themselves?

Next, you'll need to look at **how your current online strategy is helping you (or not), to fulfil these objectives**. You'll need to assess whether your site is search engine and visitor friendly, in other words whether it is 'spiderable' in the first place and meets basic usability and accessibility criteria. Next, you'll want to check your search engine visibility under the search terms that people might be using to find you and look at how your competitors are positioning themselves on the search engines.

Thirdly, you'll need to do some keyword research, to tell you **what your target audience is asking for** on search engines, which will be the lynchpin of the subsequent PR strategy. You can take data directly from the search engines' search term logs, such as Overture's keyword suggestion tool which tell you how many people made a particular search in the last month. By telling you what people are looking for in their own words, in their own time and at their own PC, keyword research helps to turn communications paradigms upside down. Like having access to the largest, most honest and unselfconscious focus group in the world, keyword research gives you priceless insight into your target market.

After all, **the first rule of communications is to talk to people in their own language, not your own.** It does not mean you can define your overall business and marketing strategy according to what people want, rather than who they are, which turns traditional demographics on its head. Likewise, it means you can formulate your PR strategy based on what people need to know, rather than what you want to tell them. The Websites that provide the best match to user demand are the ones with the best visibility on the search engines and this, in essence, is what success in online PR is all about.

For example:

Here is some data from Overture's keyword suggestion tool, showing how many searches were made in March 2005 in the UK including the words 'mobile phone'. There are a number of very interesting observations to be made from this, each with a direct impact on your PR and overall communications strategy.

610427	mobile phone
31835	mobile phone deal
24887	free mobile phone
23906	contract mobile phone
23075	nokia mobile phone
18271	mobile phone offer
17814	mobile phone shop
16369	orange mobile phone
15694	new mobile phone
11795	samsung mobile phone
9900	best mobile phone deal
9135	mobile phone sales
8431	mobile phone insurance
8038	mobile phone retailer

Of the 610,427 total searches, only 24,887 were for a 'free mobile phone', whereas 42,735 people were looking for a 'mobile phone deal' or 'best mobile phone deal'. This might suggest that people are less impressed by a free phone than they used to be, as they realise they'll end up paying one way or another, and a 'deal' or contract could be better value in the long run.

Likewise, twice as many people are looking for a 'mobile phone shop' than a 'mobile phone retailer'. So, when it comes to developing the offers, incentives and creative campaigns that will get the best response, the words that reflect the language that people are actually using, rather than industry jargon, are likely to get the best response.

Another observation is the difference in searches for Nokia, (23075) Orange (16369) and Samsung (11795). This data provides an instant snapshot of awareness and demand, and hence the competitive landscape.

Likewise, it's interesting to note the demand for mobile phone insurance, a business opportunity. If you're a mobile manufacturer, retailer or distributor, this might be a profitable service to offer, considering the demand for it on the search engines each month.

A fascinating and useful exercise is to do this keyword research once a month. This will not only help you monitor trends, such as growing awareness of a particular issue, or demand for a certain product, but can also enable you to develop a predictive search engine optimisation and marketing strategy.

Then, it's time to devise a strategy that ensures your web site meets your PR brief. This might comprise:

- making your site more search engine friendly
- optimising for issues or events as well as products and services
- optimising speculatively, for events that could happen
- using the paid-for listings to get your message across quickly
- giving your site the content that people are looking for
- creating and optimising a corporate blog
- making your press releases search engine friendly and distributing them online
- implementing a newsfeed on your Web site and syndicating your news via RSS

- sending an email newsletter
- integrating with offline marketing activity, such as optimising for campaign strap lines
- tracking how visitors behave on your web site
- monitoring and countering any negative publicity or unauthorised use of Your brands or trademarks
- monitoring and measuring your online 'audibility'

Making your site more search engine friendly

Making a web site more search engine friendly is about ensuring that it can be found on search engines, under the search terms that your customers and stakeholders are using.

You can re-engineer the site at a code, content and link level, without changing the look and feel. Or, you can build a separate campaign, or issue-specific microsite, which is linked to the home site.

Make the site 'spiderable', so it can be indexed by search engines; add more content; make the content management system search engine friendly; create more keyword-rich links to, from and within the site; use deep linking strategies to link search engine results straight through to the relevant web content. (This means that people can be taken straight to the information they need, rather than being dropped at the home page and expected to find their own way from there.)

Making a site search engine friendly means optimising it for the natural or organic search results. The advantages of targeting the natural listings with search engine optimisation or SEO are many:

- It makes a site more content rich and intuitive
- It makes a site faster to download and so more visitor friendly.
- It also makes a site more accessible to disabled visitors using assistive technologies, such as text readers.

Natural search results have greater credibility than paid-for results and enjoy a higher click through rate (the ratio is 72/28 on Google AdWords)

But results can take months to appear and you have very little control over them when they do. That's why it's best to use search engine optimisation as part of a long term visibility strategy, or by optimising well in advance of future events, such as marketing campaigns or product launches.

Optimising for issues or interests

While it's important to optimise your site for your products and services and your company name, plenty of people won't be looking for them. For example, if you take the kind of FMCG brands mentioned in the Market Sentinel Google search survey, not many people are going to go online to try and buy a packet of fish fingers. But, as the search term data below shows, thousands of people are looking for ideas and information on healthy eating, diets and child-friendly recipes on the search engines every month:

10348	healthy eating
1453	healthy eating recipe
1148	healthy eating for child
824	healthy eating plan
726	healthy eating for kid
645	healthy eating diet
459	healthy eating tip
385	healthy eating food
295	healthy eating advice
288	book on healthy eating
274	healthy eating diet plan

The solution, therefore, is to optimise that fish finger web site (or section of a larger site) for healthy eating-related search terms, using the data above to determine the navigation and content. This would not only help to bolster off-line sales of fish fingers, but would help the company to build rapport with its target audience in a completely new way. Furthermore, if you

gather data about visitors in return for privileges, such as money-off vouchers, you can communicate with your audience both online and offline, on a one-to-one basis, which is the very essence of Customer Relationship Management.

Let's take another example, that of a utilities company. If someone wants to find information about a specific oil or gas company, they'll either do a search for the name, or go straight to its Web site. But, as you can see from the search term data below, thousands of people are also looking for information about pollution-related issues. Optimising its site for these issues presents a perfect opportunity for a utilities company to increase its visibility relative to any negative publicity, such as protest sites, and get its side of the story across (such as its environmentally-friendly policies) to enhance its PR.

3933	Pollution
1865	air pollution
1489	water pollution
1077	noise pollution
561	air pollution monitoring
471	air pollution control
467	air control equipment pollution
436	air control industrial pollution
432	environmental pollution
299	light pollution
275	land pollution
240	oil pollution

Speculative optimisation

Optimising for events that haven't happened yet can ensure maximum control over the message when and if they do. To take a theoretical example, Madonna might want to optimise her Web site for the phrase 'Madonna and Guy Ritchie divorce', and point people to positive content on the site that emphasises how happy she and Guy are, having recently renewed their Wedding vows. Then, should the marriage hit the rocks, and more people start making the search 'Madonna and Guy Ritchie divorce', the site content can be updated to give her side of the story ahead of the celebrity gossip sites which might not be so positive and promoted via the paid-for listings. Other examples might be problems with common prescription drugs, online banking security scares, or issues to do with companies' operations in the third world.

Using pay per click for tactical visibility

i.e. a sudden event or issue

Statistics vary but it has been well proven by now that the search engines are the first port of call for anyone looking for news and information. The more Web-savvy will go to a dedicated news site, such as cnn.com or sky.com/skynews, or the news section of a search engine, such as Google News, but many people will just go straight to the search engine and do a search from there.

So if there's a sudden event, such as a short term promotion, a time-sensitive event such as a product launch or advertising campaign, a seasonal promotion, or even an accident, or scandal, you can get your message across in the very place that people are looking on the paid-for listings.

Giving your web site the content people are looking for

The first step here is to find out what your target audience is looking for, using the keyword research detailed earlier, and give it to them, by making sure your web site, or any associated micro-sites or corporate blogs reflect those search terms. This should include your product or service sections, any FAQs, articles, a jargon-buster or glossary, if appropriate as well as your About Us sections, and your newsfeed and blog, if you have them.

You can use search term data to find out what kind of information people are looking for about you and define your navigation and content based on user demand. For example, here's the data for BP.

5988	bp
326	bp share price
310	bp business ethics
310	bp petrol station
298	bp route planner
293	bp share
278	bp amoco
246	bp garage
237	bp route finder
213	bp 511
196	bp oil

From this, we can see that the BP share price and business ethics, a petrol station finder and route planning tool are the key things that people would hope to find on the BP web site and they should, therefore, be prominently displayed on the home page, to make them easy to find, rather than buried deep within the site.

If conversely, you have sensitive information on your site that you don't want to appear on the search engines, there are two easy ways you can prevent most spiders from accessing it, the Robots Exclusion Protocol, which means creating a specially formatted file on the site in <http://...robots.txt> or with a Robots Meta tag, which will tell the spider not to index the page or analyse it for links.

Once you have optimised your own website, you may find that you can take the public relations initiative and make your voice heard amongst in the blogosphere by getting blogging yourself.

Creating and optimising a corporate blog

A corporate blog is simply a web log or personal website written on behalf of a corporation. It could be a senior executive like Bob Lutz the Vice Chairman of GM, or it could be a prominent expert like Robert Scoble at Microsoft. These blogs have proved to be very powerful means for the corporations concerned to make their views heard in a credible way on the Internet. For example as Knowledge@Wharton reported recently in a survey on blogs:

When Ted Demopoulos, principal of Demopoulos Associates, an information technology consulting company, was travelling in Russia recently, he stopped in Surgut, Siberia, where he was surprised to find Scoble fans. "I'm out in the middle of nowhere and they ask me about Scoble," says Demopoulos. "To them, Scoble is the voice of Microsoft."

The tone of voice of these corporate blogs is very different from the media pages of a conventional corporate site. It is personal, chatty and responsive. If there is bad news, the spokesman gives a response in an honest and human way. The editorial policy is prominently displayed, thus:

Robert Scoble works at Microsoft (title: technical evangelist). Everything here, though, is his personal opinion and is not read or approved before it is posted. No warranties or other guarantees will be offered as to the quality of the opinions or anything else offered here.

Scoble displays his contact details very prominently. He does not grant press interviews but has provided the following FAQ:

Q: Why aren't you talking to the press?

A: For a variety of reasons, biggest of all is that it's in my employment contract that I not talk to the press without prior PR approval.

Q: But you talk to bloggers all the time, aren't they also press?

A: Yes.

Q: So, why can you write a blog, but you can't grant interviews?

A: I am writing in the public and everyone has equal access to the information I post in the public. If I grant interviews, that means I'm treating one person or corporation better than another. Not good.

So, as we can see from Scoble's responses, the rules of corporate blogging are different to the rules of providing a press statement. There are no sweetheart deals, or private conversations. Everything is out in the open. This emphasis on honesty is very characteristic of the medium. Robert Scoble's blog is just one of Microsoft's many employee blogs, which even have their own domain. Shel Israel, a blogging consultant, remarks:

"I think there is no question that blogging -- along with burying a great many hatchets with governments and competitors -- make the perception of Microsoft kinder and gentler than it has been in more than a decade."

How blogging can turbo-charge your PR

When the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy movie was released by Disney earlier this year the publicists Digital Outlook realised that the project carried a considerable risk. The books, the radio series and the TV series had ensured that there was a large and vocal fan-base in existence.

These folk were disproportionately active online in huge sites like H2G2. A negative response from this user group could have contaminated the whole public response to the film. Digital Outlook's response was to target agents of influence in this area, owners of message boards, web sites and blogs such as the Duke of Dunstable with the kinds of exclusive information they would normally reserve for specialist journalists in the mainstream media. They successfully built up a relationship with these thought leaders

- neutralised negative coverage
- established a powerful word of mouth campaign

all for less than £100,000 – a fraction of the normal launch costs of such a campaign.

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is a special case, but the techniques Digital Outlook used translate very well to any company who are targeting younger, tech-savvy consumers. In the US 23% of web users already use blogs for daily news, and the number is climbing fast in Europe.

What about really bad news?

It may be that you are aware of issues to do with your company and your key brands which are likely to impact your business. A good example is healthcare. It is very common for drugs that can give immense benefits to have side effects. Those side effects can cause huge negative PR, and damage the product overall.

A recent example are the cases of Merck's Vioxx and Pfizer's Celebrex painkillers, both associated with heart problems and strokes.

What can be done?

The response to these comments online should be no different to those offline, but different marketing techniques obtain. Merck took the decision to withdraw Vioxx, but Pfizer left Celebrex on the market and took the decision to produce an FAQ for their website. Pfizer communications strategy has included providing the information for appropriate third parties to respond to the questions and worries raised by their customers. This approach appears to be working.

How to set up a corporate blog

At its simplest, a corporate blog can be set up by going to a free service like www.blogger.com, but setting up a blog is the final step in thinking through the communications process for your company. There are some key questions you must ask yourself:

- **Who is the blog for?**

Is the blog intended to be for a specific set of people? Are they part of your customer-base or your entire customer base? Do they include your own employees? Do we have existing conversations with these people? What are their issues? Do you have an existing communications strategy? Does that need re-visiting? How will this audience find you?

- **What will be the editorial policy?**

Is the blog just going to be about your own company (risking low traffic) or is it going to be about the industry in general and mention competitor news and general industry developments? The latter approach is the one that has paid most dividends for the most famous corporate bloggers Robert Scoble at Microsoft and Bob Lutz at GM. It has brought them a great deal of Internet traffic and given them dominant mindshare in their sectors. Christine Halvorson, who blogs for Stonyfield Farm, Inc in New Hampshire, USA, provides blogs about the company, a Daily Scoop, and about healthy eating for kids.

- **Who will write it?**

A blog author can be anyone inside or outside the organisation with credibility about your organisation. The major requirement is

- time to create the copy
- understanding of your communications context
- expertise about the subject matter

There are three options:

1. You can employ someone specifically to blog about the company from the marketing and communications perspective;
2. You can ask your star employee to blog, whilst reminding their readers that the blog is personal, not corporate
3. You can empower your key product and technical people to blog, whilst giving them strong guidelines on what is confidential and what is not, and ensuring they don't engage in direct conversations with journalists.

- **How will you manage the content?**

A blog, like any process within your communications strategy, requires a sign-off process. Because of the need for immediacy in this environment, this cannot involve every post being signed off by the head of corporate communications. It is likely to be more effective to establish broad guidelines and make sure that certain issues (such as key financial information) are avoided in the blog. Robert Scoble publishes every blog "live" on behalf of Microsoft, although he comments that this approach has been controversial "the PR guys want to whack me," he jokes.

• How will you ensure that the appropriate people find and link to your content?

Your industry will have key opinion-formers in the world of the blogosphere. Companies like Market Sentinel can help you identify them and ensure that your content is available to them. We cannot force them to link to you, but if your content is lively, relevant and useful it is a fair bet that they will wish to do so.

• Will you open the blog to comments and will those comments be moderated?

Blog comments allow users to make a direct response to your posting and are a powerful tool for creating a sense of community around your content. Whether or not you make your blog open to comments and moderate any posts will depend on your PR strategy but as a general rule, you'll need to disallow abuse, but to allow negative commentary in blog commentary and respond to it.

• Should you put the blog on your corporate navigation?

When the blog goes live you may choose to keep it separate, but if it is an "official" blog, depending on how it relates to your communications policy in general, it is good policy to give it all the links you can. How prominent those links will depend on the tone of the blog. If it provides press releases as well as commentary, it should be prominently linked from within your "About us" section.

• What should be the look and feel?

Again, this is a call which relates closely to how "official" the content of the site is. Robert Scoble, who is now "Chief Blogging Officer" at Microsoft, uses none of the corporate livery for his blogsite.

His credibility is down to the way he stands somewhat to the side of Microsoft's official communications process.

• Who can help?

There are a small number of public relations companies exploring this area in the UK. Market Sentinel provides a managed and hosted corporate blogging service for large corporate customers, and its customers are as much concerned with managing the process as they are with making the public relations-type decisions.

In the US there is an increasing tendency to hire editorial bloggers. According to the Wall Street Journal companies are finding that it is worth \$40-\$50k a year for them to have someone blogging on their behalf.

• Should you let your employees blog?

You may not be able to stop them! Some employees have been fired for writing indiscreetly about their company. Google's Mark Jens was terminated after he complained about stock options and Heather Armstrong's sacking gave the English language the expression "dooiced" meaning: "to be fired for writing about work in one's Weblog".

Your company should, like Microsoft and Yahoo! have a policy about this. The policy should be set by HR. The major concerns include

- confidentiality of future product announcements
- financial information
- personal criticism of fellow employees

The rule of thumb for employees should therefore be:

"Don't air it on the blog first. Talk to the person you have a problem with."

Making your blog search engine friendly

You will need to optimise it to ensure your blog has visibility, in order to earn its keep as part of Your PR arsenal. The usual SEO methodologies apply for blogs – in other words, the more relevant to search queries and the more relevant sites that link to you the better the visibility. Likewise, making sure that your news is unique to you and forms a 'spiderable' archive will help a lot.

The key element in all this is automatic syndication. Blogs mostly syndicate using a standard called Really Simple Syndication. RSS consists of two protocols. One is a channel name (which might also carry information about when it was last updated) a summary of the content, consisting of a title (which also links to the content) and a brief description. The other is a "ping" which occurs when that content is published, and is used to alert subscribed readers or Websites that new content is available.

This is a typical RSS item:



An RSS item can be viewed by a Feedreader, such Newsgator, or Sage (above), or Bloglines, or it can simply appear as a headline on another web page, like this:

Online PR - latest news

Today

Feedster CEO about turning on customers to your brand through blogs -- IMedia Connection

Survey: Small and Medium U.S. Businesses Step Up to Business Information - Shore Communications

Pew report on Web cams use

David Weinberger: No, I'm not keeping up with your blog.

BMW ORACLE Racing Blog

The Economist: British newspapers have a new contender: the BBC

Warren Bickford (IABC) -- Warren's Top 10 Trends and Issues - Part 2

Warren Bickford (IABC) -- Warren's Top 10 Trends and Issues - Part 1

The result is that readers can filter large quantities of content and only need go to the Webpage to access the content that has most relevance for them. The simplicity and usefulness of this way of accessing online content has won many admirers. For blogger Ben Barren RSS is "the most important [Internet] development since the browser."

Preventing blog spam

You'll also want to make sure that your blog can't be spammed by people either wanting to reduce your visibility or increase their own. You might also find that people post comments to your blog, with links to their sites, in order to improve their link equity. There are number of methods you can use to prevent this – which you'll find at <http://www.blogspam.org/Website.html>

Making your press releases search engine friendly and distributing them online

Most large sites have Media centre, a dedicated area of the site where people looking for information, can go and find annual reports, bios of key staff, company background and history.

This area should host RSS feeds of press releases.

The first step here is to establish who would most likely publish or distribute news or information about you, such as affiliates, blogs, news sites and news search engines, press release distribution services, portals and industry-specific community sites.

The next step is make your press releases and other submissions search engine friendly by

making them 'spiderable', keyword rich (according to the search terms your target audience is using and with a link back to the relevant page on your site). Post them, according to each site's preferred processes and criteria and track the results, in terms of increased traffic and links to your site.

Implementing a newsfeed on your Web site

Putting a newsfeed on your site, is a very easy and affordable way of making your site more search engine friendly, of positioning you as an authority in your market and giving you an instantly accessible vehicle to get your messages across. While lots of sites have news, it is often in the form of articles or stories from other sites, with a link through to that site, which poses the danger that a visitor might follow the link and never come back. It's much better to have unique news, written specially for you, to keep visitors on your site for as long as possible.

Once again, the first step is to use keyword research to find out what kind of news people would be interested in, which would define your editorial brief. Next, as with blogging, you can either write your own content or outsource it, depending on time and budget constraints.

However, if you write it and implement it yourself, you'll need to make sure that each news item becomes an individual, search engine friendly page, with an archive at the back-end of your site.

It is well worth submitting your site to the news sites and search engines, such as Google News and Yahoo! News, so they can include your news in their news indexes.

How to turn your newsfeed into an email newsletter

Once you have a newsfeed, it's a relatively simple step to have your own email newsletter, which you can promote to your visitors as a helpful service (and use the subscription process to gather some useful information about them at the same time). The easiest way is to simply create a template, and once a week, or fortnight you flow the news headlines, in the form of links to the stories, into the template, which you email to your database of subscribers. Remember, you need to follow the laws on opt-in marketing, by making sure that you don't send your newsletter out unsolicited and that you give people a clear and simple unsubscribe process.

Supporting and integrating with other offline marketing activity

Just as your web site is a vital and integrated part of your business strategy, so should your online PR activity be a part of your overall marketing and promotions.

What this means in practical terms, is making sure that your web site supports and enhances the rest of your sales and marketing activity, whether it's TV advertising, direct marketing, sponsorship, branding or a channel communications programme. After all, if you're running a high profile television campaign, you can be sure that thousands of people will go and look for you online, either by typing your URL directly into the browser or by looking on a search engine.

So, you'll need to make sure your site not only has campaign-specific content, and dedicated landing pages, before, rather than after your campaign breaks, your site should be optimised for the campaign strap lines, offers, incentives and any relevant, generic search terms. If you want to appear in the natural listings, you'll need to sort this out at least 3 to 6 months in advance. If you don't have time or you'd prefer to target and test different search terms and creative approaches, the pay-per-click listings to give you instant visibility as well as flexibility.

Monitoring and Measurement:

Tracking visitor behaviour

Your visitor tracking data, which you can gather with cookies, page-tagging or log file analysis, will also give you a wealth of intelligence about which of your messages are reaching web users

Monitoring and countering any negative publicity or unauthorised use of your brands or trademarks

It's vital that you know what the web is saying about you. This means not only keeping a close eye on your competitors and how they're positioning themselves, or whether they're bidding against your trademarks or brands, on the pay per click search engines. It means looking out for examples of cyber-squatting, passing off, copying your content, copyright infringement or grey market importing. You can do this yourself, by regularly searching the web, visiting the influential blogs and community sites in your sector and checking your known competitors, or you can subscribe to a monitoring and reporting service, such as that offered by Market Sentinel.

In many cases, if you do find instances of passing off, or content scraping, a simple phone call, or if that doesn't work, a letter from your solicitor, is enough to sort it out. But in the instance of finding that a competitor is bidding on terms you consider to be 'owned' by you, you'll need to be aware what your rights are. For example, Google's

trademark bidding policy differs from Overture's, which states that no site may bid on another company's trademarks unless they have content specifically relating to it, such as a comparison chart.

However, in the case of sites such as grey market resellers or negative blogs, which aren't doing anything illegal, but you don't want your audience to find, the solution is simply to beat them at the visibility game. Harness the positive power of search engine optimisation and marketing to make sure you and any supporting sites, such as your corporate blog, are at the top of the list.

Benchmarking your online audibility

There are some public tools which provide a good introduction: Google can show you the volume of the commentary about your company. Blogpulse has excellent resources for tracking the volume of buzz. Technorati monitors how many incoming links you are receiving. Market Sentinel can show you how many people have linked to your post, or mentioned your story and gives you an audibility report turning on how many influential sites you have reached. Market Sentinel's monitoring extends beyond the blogosphere into the world of the static web, showing how ideas can be tracked through web discussion forums, and newsgroups.

Market Sentinel's audibility index monitors changes in:

- visitor traffic
- incoming links
- link quality
- search engine page rank
- web traffic ranking

Using this index over time enables you to get the measure of your communications strategy and to benchmark it against your competitors.

Benchmarking your customer loyalty – case study

Market Sentinel offer an online net promoters' index, where we create a measurement of your customer's loyalty. This is done by taking a baseline sample of those prepared to express an opinion, collecting positive recommendations of a product or service, and negative feedback, and deducting the latter from the former. The resulting figure is the "Net Promoters" index. It is based on the work of Frederick Reichheld, whose Harvard Business Review article "The One Number You Need To Grow" demonstrated the correlation between customer loyalty and stock price.

Market Sentinel recently conducted a sample exercise, looking at the upmarket eco-friendly cosmetic brands Lush, Urban Decay and Body Shop.

Eliminating advertising spam and neutral comments such as "I went to the shops and I bought x", the researchers reviewed 9,000 blog search results which had been made over a period of around 120 days, looking for

- a) statements by customers
- b) statements which specifically endorsed or deprecated the brand, and
- c) sticking to a comparable sample of 20 customers in each case

We produced the following results:

Brand	Promoters	Detractors	Net Promoters
Body Shop	+ 18	- 2	+16
Lush	+ 19	- 1	+18
Urban Decay	+ 20	- 0	+20

All the results are creditable. In some done recently using the same methodology off-line by a leading brand specialist, one UK supermarket scored -8!

However the companies concerned set a high bar for themselves in presenting themselves as ethical as well as providing high quality, luxury products. Amidst the "real" results of recommendations by humans were a high quantity of fake recommendations from automatically-created blogs. This is a high-risk strategy for the brands in question, as it runs the risk of making them appear to be cynically spamming the search engines.

Researchers identified key issues with the brands' detractors which included

- Website problems with international orders
- Illegal sales tax policies
- Lack of response to email
- Specific product criticisms

The key characteristic of detractors is that they more influential than supporters. Avoiding having any detractors, as Urban Decay did in this small survey, is a very good sign for the brand, and one investors should note.

Contacts

We hope you found this White Paper interesting. If you have any feedback, or any questions about the issues and techniques described here, please contact us and we'll be pleased to help.

Nicholine Hayward

Marketing Director, Weboptimiser

www.weboptimiser.com

020 7953 7150

Nicholine@weboptimiser.com

Mark Rogers

CEO, Market Sentinel

020 7793 1575

mark.rogers@marketsentinel.com

About Weboptimiser

Founded in 1996 and based in central London, Weboptimiser is one of the UK's largest and longest-established search engine optimisation and marketing companies. With a unique portfolio of ethical, measurable services, from organic search engine optimisation and paid search marketing to web analytics, contextual advertising, usability and accessibility, we have a proven record of success for corporate clients including Marriott, Cheapflights, Marks & Spencer and the Chartered Institute of Marketing.

With a pioneering approach that covers the complete visitor lifecycle, we can help you research, recruit and retain your web visitors, build rapport and create new revenue opportunities. At Weboptimiser, there's more to optimisation than just search engine positions, more to visitor tracking than log file analysis and more to pay-per-click than automated bid management software. As a result, our clients' sites aren't just easier to find on search engines, but faster, smarter, busier and more profitable.

How can we help you?

For a confidential discussion of your **search engine marketing strategy**

www.weboptimiser.com ,

call David White on 020 7953 8536 or email david@weboptimiser.com

For a **free assessment** of Your site's search engine and visitor friendliness, visit:

www.weboptimiser.com

For a free subscription to our Weekly

Internet Marketing newsletter, visit:

www.weboptimiser.com

For a cup of tea, visit:

The Foundry,

156 Blackfriars Road,

London, SE1 8EN

About Market Sentinel

Market Sentinel was founded in September 2004, after a leading US technology company commissioned us to provide live feeds from message boards discussing the company and its competitor's products.

Market Sentinel's unique algorithm offers online monitoring from any website. The company offer notification and response services, ranging from blog and message-board monitoring and reporting, to blog creation and hosting. In 2005 it was nominated for "Hottest Start Up" in the Net Imperative Awards.

Our customers include UK FTSE100 companies and major PR agencies.

CEO Mark Rogers, was previously co-founding commissioning editor of BBC Online, and co-founder Amazon.com Anywhere.

Its CTO Ian Davis, was co-founder Calaba (now Surf Kitchen), architected Sky Interactive's recently-launched TV e-commerce service. Pioneered and co-wrote RSS 1.0 XML news syndication standards.

Simon Rogers, Director of Sales and Marketing is a chartered accountant whose background includes senior positions at Hoskyns, Cap Gemini, Burberrys, Corning, and Norcross.

How can we help you?

For an online brand audit showing how your message works online contact:

simon.rogers@marketsentinel.com

or phone +44 (0)20 7793 1575

or +44 (0)79 7700 1372

Or visit us at:

Market Sentinel Ltd.

155 Kennington Park Road

London SE11 4JJ

UK