



Blog? Not So Much. Listen? Much.

— by Christina Kerley (“CK”) —

Not every company needs to blog. There I said it. And ask anyone, I'm a big fan of blogging. But the fact is, many times a blog just adds noise. If there's one thing we don't need is more noise. (What we need is more value.) So while not every company must blog, every company needs to be listening.

And that means processes.

But many of the clients, colleagues and prospects I'm speaking with are talking a lot about social media "programs"—like blogs, microblogs, wikis, social networking sites and online videos—yet hardly anything about processes.

Yikes.

Why my concern? **Because the true value proposition of social media for companies is that it gives them the ability to identify new markets, new opportunities, potential risks and needed improvements.** And it gives them this ability on a silver platter—all of this rich information actively and freely circulating just waiting for smart marketers to do what they do best: turning rich market information into actionable marketing intelligence.

But the blogosphere can't give companies any of these benefits if they're not listening on a regular basis...that's where processes come into play. And telling companies they need to listen—while all well and good—is pretty darn nebulous. It's like telling companies they need to be good to their customers.

That's why we need to be telling companies what processes they need to instill and, more to the point, why they need to implement them. So here goes (I sure hope everyone's listening):

- **Monitoring conversations.** This cannot be a bot that merely generates results when your company name is cited. You need smart humans who understand what types of conversations are relevant to your current or future initiatives. And many times the important conversations won't even mention your company, but a competitor.
- **Monitoring the space for new blogs, bloggers and brand advocates.** I cannot stress this enough: do not only follow the so-called A-List blogs or big names in your industry or markets. Remember, fads and trends always start on the fringes and, only over time, make their way to the mainstream. Plus, you might be overlooking brand advocates simply because you're not paying attention (and they might be prime candidates for your Customer Advisory Board...which is another vital "listening" initiative).

(continued...)

- **Assessing when companies should touch and when they should only look.** This is a case-by-case, convo-by-convo basis if ever there was one. Sometimes it's important to voice-in on a conversation, debate or discussion. But many times it's better to let the market discuss while you listen and learn. Consumers want to be heard, but don't want to feel like companies are meddling or trying to control their opinions.
- **Identifying opportunities to improve products/services, innovate new product categories and increase market share.** It's best to view the blogosphere as a huge R&D think tank. Since the feedback is unbiased—save "pay for posts" or blatant attempts at getting company names mentioned—marketers are afforded a vast (and free!) research vehicle. But companies need smart researchers who understand what feedback, and patterns thereof, signal opportunities and gaps.
- **Exploring the "next big thing" (...and then the next one).** Discern hype from hope on new technologies, new applications, methodologies and buzzwords. Sometimes the next big thing is just the old thing wrapped in new words (this happens all the time), and other times these technologies are worth investing time and budget in.
- **Scrutinizing marketing tactics.** I'm a big fan of innovating but I'm also a fan of learning from others. Companies need to scrutinize new promotional programs and tactics, even ones that might not have been leveraged in their respective industry. Some blogger outreach programs have done well, others have failed miserably. Find out which and why and benchmark best practices from this information.

While these processes apply to all organizations, the way companies will implement them will vary. For some organizations these processes might be conducted by the marketing department. For others, these processes might be better suited for the research team. Or the company may already be spread too thin, or lack the needed competencies, and need to hire new professionals or retain a service provider.

But ultimately the responsibility rests with marketing. Because information is just that. The payoff—and the reason companies need processes—is to move from information to intelligence.

So the rule of thumb is: **If you want to lead in this space, you'll do so by listening, and that means processes first, programs thereafter.** Remember, your markets are holding you accountable for the implications of their conversations...whether you're listening or not.



About the Author:

Christina Kerley ("CK") has been bolstering brands, companies and causes for over 15 years. In '99 she founded her own consultancy and has worked with many Fortune 500 companies. A respected voice and strategist, her marketing blog—ranking in *AdAge's* "Power 150" and *The Viral Garden's* "Top 25"—provides readers a clever, candid analysis of strategy, social media and socially responsible marketing.

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