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Managing Technology **Attention, Bloggers**

For small businesses that can't afford a lot of marketing, the blogosphere offers a cheaper alternative

By SHELLY BANJO

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Andrew Milligan was stuck. He had spent \$60,000 on trade-show exhibitions and magazine advertising for the bean-bag chairs made by his company, Los Angeles-based Sumo Lounge International, and sales were still languishing at a couple of bean bags a day.

So Mr. Milligan, like many small businesses looking to gain exposure and boost sales, turned to the blogosphere. He sent an email to the popular technology blog Engadget.com, asking the editors to review his product. While they declined that request, they agreed to trade three months of advertising on their site for 20 Sumo bean bags to outfit their new office.

RECOMMENDED READING

[Reaching out to bloggers and social-media sites](#) can help small companies build buzz even when marketing budgets are small. These blogs and books can get you started, says Scott Monty, relationship director in Boston at Crayon, a marketing company.

THE JOURNAL REPORT



[Read how one company got](#) outside money -- and still kept control. Plus, [small companies have a host](#) of opportunities to cut travel costs, as hotels, airlines, car-rental companies and others try to win their business.

- See the complete [Small Business](#) report.

Within 48 hours of the Sumo ad's appearance on Engadget.com, an editor from Playboy magazine clicked on the ad and liked what he saw. He featured the bean bags in the magazine, and within about a week, Sumo had sold 500 bean bags.

Pleased with the results of that effort, Mr. Milligan began to pitch his bean bags to bloggers on a daily basis, sending them emails with links to Sumo's Web site and offers to send bean bags to review. Two years later, after more than 250 blogger endorsements or posts about Sumo's bean bags, the company's annual profit had tripled. "This approach saved my business," says Mr. Milligan. "It took Sumo from nothing to a fairly large and profitable company."

Businesses of all types and sizes are focusing on the power of bloggers as opinion shapers. But harnessing that power is particularly important for small-business owners who don't have the money to create name recognition with big marketing campaigns. By connecting with the right blogs, small businesses can generate buzz around their products and services and increase sales dramatically.

The first step for any business that wants to use the blogosphere as a marketing tool is to identify blogs read by members of its target market.



Becky Sciallo

Watercolor artist and bluegrass player Robert Yonke.

When 65-year-old watercolor artist Robert Yonke wanted to promote his paintings of bluegrass musicians, he and his daughter, Becky Sciallo, sent pitches to three online bluegrass hubs, the Bluegrass Blog, the Mandolin Cafe and the Cybergrass Bluegrass Music News Network, asking them to review or post photos of his art.

"My father regularly read these [sites] and knew the readership," Ms. Sciallo says. "If anyone would be interested, they would."

All three sites wrote about Mr. Yonke's work, and he began receiving orders overnight. But the big payoff came when the International Bluegrass Music Association commissioned Mr. Yonke to provide a painting for the central graphic element on marketing materials for the 2008 International Bluegrass Music Awards.

"The executive director of the IBMA saw the artwork on the Bluegrass Blog and called us right away to see if we would be interested," Ms. Sciallo says.

The blog exposure has brought in buyers from as far away as England and New Zealand, Ms. Sciallo says. "How else could I have reached people all over the world while I am sitting in the middle of a snowstorm in Pittsburgh?"

It's easy for any business to find relevant blogs using searches on sites like Technorati.com or Blogsearch.Google.com, says Dave Taylor, author of a technology-help forum and blog, AskDaveTaylor.com. Other resources include social-bookmarking sites like Del.icio.us and StumbleUpon.com.

Joining the Conversation

Another way small-business owners can get noticed is to contribute to the conversation on relevant blogs.

"If you become an active participant on my blog by commenting on a post or writing something on your blog and linking to mine, I am going to notice," says David Meerman Scott, an author and speaker who writes a blog on online marketing at www.WebInkNow.com. The blog's readers will notice, too. "Participating and adding to the conversation establishes your name and company as an industry leader," says Mr. Scott.

When Kate Peterson, owner of baby-gifts retailer Baby Bella in Fish Creek, Wis., opened her online store, she started her own blog at BlogBabyBella.biz and began monitoring and posting comments on other baby-related blogs. One result was free exposure on CWAHM.com, the site of the online network Christian Work at Home Moms.



When Jill Hart, the founder of CWAHM.com, took a writing hiatus for the Christmas holiday, she posted an announcement on her blog seeking guest bloggers. Ms. Peterson jumped at the chance to reach out to mothers who might be interested in Baby Bella's products. "We approached her and asked to write a guest post on unique Christian-themed gifts, a topic her particular readers would be interested in," Ms. Peterson says.

Baby Bella couldn't measure the sales resulting from that one blog post, but "sales have definitely increased since we began pursuing this strategy," Ms. Peterson says.

Ms. Hart, meanwhile, says she keeps an eye on the Baby Bella blog, and she recently mentioned Baby Bella in a posting on CWAHM.com about baby leggings -- an invaluable referral.

Outside the box: To get bloggers to review their clients' printers, a marketing team sent the bloggers customized comic strips—featuring photos of the bloggers found online.

believing the company's word," Ms. Peterson says.

"Customers will listen to an unbiased opinion from friends, family or trusted bloggers before

Some online-marketing gurus say that, in many cases, posting comments on blogs like Ms. Peterson did is crucial to earning a mention from their authors.

"Getting a blogger to write about your company before you participate on their blog is like asking a person to marry you without a first date," says Denise Wakeman, co-founder of the Blog Squad, a Los Angeles-based consulting firm that advises businesses on how to use blogs as part of an online marketing strategy.

Others say personalizing a pitch can sometimes win a mention without participation in blog discussions. Darren Barefoot and Julie Szabo recently co-authored an online book called "Getting to First Base: A Social Media Marketing Playbook." To promote the book, they played to the romantic angle of the title by sending personal, hand-written letters asking 10 influential bloggers to review the book.

They enclosed each letter in a sticker-studded, perfume-scented pink envelope. In each letter, they included the address of a Web site set up just for the recipient, where the blogger would find a two-minute video message from the authors welcoming him or her to read the book. The idea was a hit: Almost every blogger wrote about the experience.

Mr. Barefoot and Ms. Szabo took another creative approach to promote a new line of printers for Brother International Corp. (Canada) Ltd., one of their clients. To ask bloggers to review the printers, they created pitches in the form of comic strips customized for each blogger. The duo found pictures of the bloggers online and pasted the images into the strip.

"You want to be creative, but play to your strengths," says Mr. Barefoot. "If you are a T-shirt vendor, for example, create personalized T-shirts for each blogger."

Showing Them the Goods

Short of such a personalized approach, businesses should at least be sure to send their product to bloggers whenever possible, rather than simply sending a press release that describes the product, online-marketing experts say.

A company called ooVoo LLC took that principle a step further in promoting new videoconferencing software, offering the software as a way for bloggers to connect with their readers. "The last thing the blogosphere needed was another software-release announcement," says Scott Monty of Crayon, a marketing company that helped plan ooVoo's promotion.

New York-based ooVoo invited more than 20 prominent bloggers to each host a live, 15-to-30-minute video chat with readers on topics of their choice, using the ooVoo software. Each blogger could chat with five people at the same time.

A number of the bloggers posted entries announcing their participation in the event and then wrote about their reactions to the chats. In addition, participating readers wrote reactions on their own blogs, and comments quickly spread across the blogosphere.

The event created "a viral effect with momentum," says ooVoo's chief executive, Philippe Schwartz. "The ripple effects were huge."

--Ms. Banjo is a staff reporter for The Wall Street Journal in South Brunswick, N.J.