

Blog Design Basics: Usability and Branding

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Blog Design and Usability Tips

Denise Wakeman, The Blog Squad, www.BlogSquad.biz

Create a design plan for your blog

- Clearly identify your blog's focus and business brand
- Create quality content and post regularly
 - 74% of readers return for the content

How do you improve the visibility?

- Make your blog content readable
 - Use white space
 - Short sentences
 - Short paragraphs
 - Only one space after a period ending a sentence
 - Organize content - easily scannable
 - Liberal use of subtitles and sub-headings
 - Can use color in sub-headings
 - Use bulleted lists and number lists
 - Use the extended post feature so that a blog post is only 2-3 paragraphs long, and then they can click to continue reading
- Build trust with your readers
 - Photo - a professional photo is preferable to a family shot
 - Bio
 - Use the first person personal pronoun "I"
 - Write in a conversational way, avoid using a formal 3rd person impersonal business bio
 - Testimonials
 - Put on a page
 - Or put in a sidebar or TypeList
- Make it easy to subscribe
 - Email: Feedblitz.com or Feedburner.com
 - RSS feeds: can extend the reach through Feedburner.com
- Include a list of related posts with each post
 - Find other posts on your blog that are similar and link to them
 - Use the post's permalinks when you link to previous posts
- Make it easy to find content
 - Categories - make sure this is enabled and that you assign every post to a category (makes it easy for readers to find specific content)
 - A page with links to top posts, then create a list on sidebar
 - Descriptive headlines with keywords - helps people to find specific topics and content useful to them
 - Use descriptive words in your links, not "click here"
- Features - what is the purpose and how does it help me achieve my goals
 - Blogroll or a list of your favorite blogs
 - Archives
 - Widgets - search boxes, blog services, social sites

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- Ads? Be cautious and strategic - does it add to the value of your blog? Affiliate links and ads may make more sense and be more on-topic for your business
- Comments
- Posts
- Subscriptions
- Get your own domain name and use domain mapping for branding your blog

Branding elements

- Logo
- Tagline - describes 1) who the blog is for, 2) what are benefits of reading the blog and 3) who is the blog author
- Topic definition - can expand on about page or a separate page
- Colors

Eye Tracking Study - Poynter Institute

- Users spend a good deal of time initially looking at the top left of the page and upper portion of the page before moving down and right-ward: **F** shape
 - Changing or switching sidebar positions will give readers a new, fresh look at your items. Keeping the same things in the same position means they will stop 'seeing' them.
- Ads perform better in the left hand column over the right column of a page.
- Navigation placed at the top of a homepage performed best.
- People's eyes typically scan lower portions of a page seeking something to grab their attention.
- Close proximity to popular editorial content really helps ads get seen.



Denise Wakeman is a founding partner of The Blog Squad™, a division of Krakoff Wakeman Associates, Inc. Since 1996, Denise has been assisting professionals and small businesses to leverage the Internet with online marketing strategies using blogs, ezines, content development plans and ecommerce systems. Denise has more than 20 years experience in small business management and with her partner Patsi Krakoff, is co-author of numerous blogging programs and books including "[Build a Better Blog: The Ultimate Guide for Boosting Your Business with a Professional Blog](#)" and "[The Blog to Book Project.](#)" The Blog Squad authors 10 business blogs and publishes two e-newsletters. Denise's primary blogs are at www.BuildaBetterBlog.com and www.BizTipsBlog.com.

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The 11 Biggest Mistakes Small Business Bloggers Make

Rich Brooks, flyte new media, www.flyte.biz

It's easy to get started blogging...today's blogging software is inexpensive, easy-to-learn, and does most of the heavy lifting for you. However, it's a lot more difficult to build a *successful* blog: one that attracts prospects and clients, establishes you as an expert or an industry leader, and helps you attain search engine "findability."

With all the hype that surrounds blogging these days, too many businesses are jumping into blogging without knowing the pitfalls. Here are eleven of the biggest mistakes small businesses make when blogging, and how to avoid them.

1) They don't get their own domain name for their blog. The problem with piggybacking your blog on another company's URL, such as *mycompany.typepad.com* or *mybusiness.blogger.com* is that it locks you into that **blogging platform**.

If that company goes out of business or you decide to move your blog you'll lose all of the incoming links you've so carefully cultivated.

What to do: From day one, get your own domain name for your blog and make sure it's set up properly at your blogging platform of choice. Then, if you're forced to move, you'll at least be able to keep the same domain and all of your **incoming links**.

2) They use the blogging platform's pre-set defaults. One reason it's so easy to get started with blogging is that you can start blogging moments after you've signed up.

From design templates to color choices to pre-chosen **categories** for organizing your content, a lot of the decision-making process has been simplified or removed for those who want to jump right in.

Unfortunately, these are the same templates, the same color schemes and the same categories that so many other bloggers are using. (In addition, some platforms don't allow you to re-name the pre-set categories, limiting what you can later change.)

Every communication from your company—including your blog—should be representative of your brand. To paraphrase Michael Levine, author of *A Branded World*, will your content have more weight in a Tiffany Box or in the same plain wrapper that every other blogger is using?

What to do: If you don't have the skill set in house, hire a professional to create a design for your blog that complements the rest of your marketing collateral. It will probably require both graphic design and advanced Web design skills.

If that's not possible within your marketing budget, at least get someone to create a unique page header and change the color scheme to match your business colors.

Also, don't lock yourself into any pre-set categories, but roll your own instead.

3) They don't read other blogs. Blogs are often the best way to stay on top of trends that affect your industry and your clients' business. By ignoring these blogs, you're missing a real opportunity to stay in the loop and establish yourself as an expert.

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In addition, by reading other blogs, even ones not in your industry, you can get a better understanding of what works and what doesn't.

What to do: Download a standalone **news reader** (for Mac users I recommend NetNewsWire by Rancho, or) or use a browser-based option like Bloglines (<http://www.bloglines.com>) to subscribe to many blogs all from the same page.

In this fashion, you can keep track of dozens of blogs every day without having to visit dozens of Web sites.

You can get the remaining 8 tips on Rich Brooks' site at: <http://www.flyte.biz/special/free-report/>



Rich Brooks is founder and president of **flyte new media**, a Web design and Internet marketing firm in Portland, ME. He writes a free monthly email newsletter, *flyte log*, and blogs regularly at *flyte blog: web marketing strategies for small business*, <http://www.flyteblog.com>, and at **MaineToday.com** under the banner **Internet Marketing 101**, <http://business.maintoday.com/smallbusiness/internetmarketing/>, on Web marketing topics such as search engine optimization, email marketing, business blogs and building Web sites that sell. You can listen to his podcast, *flytecast: web strategies for small business*, at www.flytecast.com or find it at the iTunes Music Store under business podcasts.

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Top 5 Blog Usability Tips (plus bonus)

John T. Unger, www.TypePadHacks.org and www.johntunger.com

1. Make it easy for people to find exactly what they're looking for

If you're selling goods or services, chances are that new visitors to your blog arrived by searching for what you have to offer. Blogs are a great way to promote your product by writing about the back story, details, industry news or personal news in your niche... but remember that people don't want to have to hunt and peck for your offer. Plenty of people will advise you that you need to "soft-sell," appear conversational and personal, that the web, and blogs especially, are not a commercial space. Untrue. If you have something to offer, make sure it is easy to find.

Some visitors to your site will want to look at lots of content before making a purchase or getting in touch about services. That's fine, nothing prevents them from doing so. But some, like me, want a buy it now button at the top of the page. I can read on if I want to, but if I've already chosen to buy I don't have to jump through hoops to get there.

As an example, my primary income is generated by selling my art through a blog. I've always had pages showing what is currently available, arranged by category and accessible from the menu at the top of the page. But when I put a series of thumbnails on every page showing my ten most popular items with a buy now link and a more info link, sales increased by 500% immediately. I made it easy for people to find what they were looking for, compare items, and make an immediate choice. Results show: they liked it.

On my hacks blog, I offer an a la carte code menu where people can select individual hacks to add to their blog for a set price. What I've found there is a little different: they look over the list, see a bunch of items with clear pricing and then call to talk about an entire redesign that can run anywhere from \$500-\$4000. Making the price clear and services easy to understand is a great way to make readers comfortable with the offered services.

My recommendations for clear blog navigation include:

- A navigation menu at the top of every page that points to the most important areas of your site. If you need more than seven links, use a drop-down menu and break them into categories.
- The RSS subscription button should be near the top of the sidebar (return readers are the most valuable asset your blog builds).
- If you have a product or service for sale, there should be a prominent call to action above the fold which give readers a link to more info AND the option to buy now.
- A search field and links to categories should be easy to find and should be placed above the fold.
- Everything you add should have some direct benefit to you and the reader both... The more things there are to choose from, the more likely that the choice becomes overwhelming and people seek elsewhere.

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2. Optimize the speed of your blog

If your blog takes too long to load, most people will close the window and move on. The best way to make sure that they stick around is to understand how browsers load content and insure that your main content loads first. Typically, pages load top to bottom, left to right. So if your main content area is the leftmost element in your design, people can read your articles while the sidebar(s) on the right continue to load. If you're using a lot of widgets, see which ones take the longest to load and put them as far right and as far down the page as possible.

3. Consider your readers' needs first. Learn where your needs and theirs overlap. Focus on those areas most strongly.

What your readers want is ultimately more important than what you "like."

Ideally, the overlap between your needs and your readers' is a one-to-one match. But in the real web, there's some discrepancy. By focusing as much as possible on the area where both needs come together, you'll meet with the greatest success.

The best, and perhaps worst, thing about the current state of the web is that there are an endless number of widgets that you can use to add features to your blog. The most important question you should ask yourself before adding any of them is "how does this help further the goals of the reader who has arrived at my site?" Yes, there are widgets you might want to add that have only selfish value or are just "fun." But generally, the most important ones will serve the needs of both you and your readers. An RSS subscribe button should be prominent (you get more readers, they get an easy way to be notified when you post new content). Social bookmarking tools help you get more links, while helping your readers to save important articles for later reference. If you're selling a book (for example) an Amazon link saves readers the trouble of searching for the book while increasing your sales. Search and category links help make your older posts accessible while benefitting you by increasing page views. Unless you're writing about video games, avoid putting a pacman widget in the sidebar. People probably don't need the time, weather, or your music playlist either (unless you're a meteorologist or music critic).

Careful attention to your blog's stats will also help you determine how people find you, what they are looking for and how (or whether) they find it. The stats can be a good roadmap for how to improve your site's navigation.

You can get the rest of John Unger's tips at <http://www.typepadhacks.org>.



John T. Unger is an artist, entrepreneur, designer, coder, consultant and blogger. His TypePad Hacks blog (www.typepadhacks.org) is widely recognized as one of the best resources on custom code for the TypePad platform. As an early pioneer of business blogging, John is an expert on the subject of combining blogs and eCommerce. In addition to a highly successful art business, he is available for custom code, consulting on business, marketing and software. He enjoys problem solving in almost any field and prefers the job title of Impossibility Remediation Specialist.