Business Blogs

The Best Social Media Tool For Businesses

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Introduction

The history of computers and related technologies played a vital role in the emergence of e-businesses that brought new dimensions to the traditional "brick and mortar" way of doing business in the early 1990's. It follows a very logical sequence, of course, that is not difficult to comprehend considering the speed with which the computers could be used to add, sort, analyse and process all sorts of information and data with just a few keystrokes. It was a boon for any business, big or small.

In the late 1990's, the Internet transformed the business world drastically replacing dusty old ledgers with modern computer networks that connected millions of businesses worldwide and helped in the transaction of billions of dollars across fibre optic cables.

Use of Web in Business: e-Commerce / e-Business

The Internet opened to commercial use in 1991 making *e-commerce* possible, and since then many businesses have made their online presence on the web, in the form of websites. In 1994, e-commerce was mostly restricted to buying and selling on the web and it took another four years for the development of the Internet security protocols like HTTP and DSL that allowed for rapid access and a persistent connection to the Internet. Therefore, it was only in the year 2000 that a great number of businesses from the US and Western Europe represented their services on the worldwide web. This was when the meaning of the term "**e-commerce**" changed to be defined as, "*the process of purchasing of available goods and services over the Internet using secure connections and electronic payment services.*"

It didn't take long for the "brick and mortar" companies or businesses to recognize the advantages of this electronic commerce and they soon began to add these capabilities on to their web pages in the form of online stores. By 2001, the largest form of e-commerce, Business-to-Business (B2B) model, had around $700 billion in transactions.

The advantages of e-commerce were obvious. The consumers were able to browse and search through a large database of products and services very easily from the comforts of their homes. They could see actual prices and compare them with others online. They could prepare a list of their orders at their own convenience and time, conduct the transaction online and even have them delivered at their doorstep.

The businesses were also at an advantage as the web and the search engines provided an easy way for them to be found by the consumers without having to pay too much for an advertising campaign. The big and small business companies could now reach global audiences equally, thereby eliminating the geographical limitations.

Amazon and Ebay were among the first successful Internet companies to allow electronic transactions, which were soon followed by others like Dell, Staples, Office Depot and Hewlett Packard.

The immense success of these companies due to their online strategies brought into focus the importance of *e-business*. **E-business** was no longer about just buying and selling online but went deeper into the processes and cultures of an enterprise. It encompassed the entire business systems that are directly connected to the customers, employees, vendors, and business partners, using Intranets, Extranets, e-commerce technologies, collaborative applications, and the Web.

Successful new-businesses could now emerge from nowhere taking little more than two years to formulate an innovative business idea, establish a web-presence and reach a dominant position in its chosen sector. The Internet facilitated equal opportunities for both big and small businesses to reach out to a global audience, thereby expanding their reach and business horizons. Therefore, establishing an online presence became an important factor for the overall growth and prosperity of any business, especially if it wanted to remain ahead of its competitors and visible to all.

As it can be seen, the Internet had a very positive and forceful impact upon the business world in many ways helping them to evolve and formulate newer marketing strategies that are not only cost effective but very productive and profitable too.

The Rise of Social Media

Businesses all over are always looking for new ways to beat their competition, get more customers and interact positively with them hoping to increase their sales and profits. Although, having an online presence in the form of websites did help businesses to increase their visibility, provide information to customers about their company, products and services but it was still a one-way communication from the business to the customer.

Maintaining a website requires special technical skill and knowledge. The company or business has to rely on a website developer or designer to make even small changes to the content or layout of the pages if they need to update any information. They could not interact directly with their customers on a one-to-one basis on their websites, nor could they get any feedback about their services or products. For this they relied on separate mediums, mostly in the form of customer care centres, or call centres.

By and by it became clear that having a website alone was not enough and there was a need to engage the customers in a two-way dialogue. Web 2.0 provided the answers. Businesses started interacting with their customers by means of, what has now become popularly known as social media, Internet based applications that allow for user interaction. It came in the form of groups, forums, blogs, microblogs, communities and other social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc. All businesses could now use this medium to advertise, market, sell products online, network with people, get feedback, communicate and engage with customers. Additionally, in contrast to the traditional means, these methods were cheaper, faster and accessible 24X7.

Social Media Bandwagon

Big and small businesses are now using, or at least trying to use, the social media in varied manners to support their offline endeavours. The results are as varied, if not more, and the jury is still out on what works the best. However, there is a unanimous view on two aspects; first is that the consumers are lending credibility to what they read on the social media especially coming from someone they trust and second that the traditional means of marketing are becoming less effective. These are good enough reasons for all businesses to pull up their socks and get on the social media bandwagon.

There is a wide choice out there for social media, each one having its pros and cons, but blogs stand out for their sheer power and versatility. Unfortunately, most businesses overlook this medium in favour of more easy to handle applications, which powerful as they might be, are restrictive in nature. Having a blog offers many benefits that other social media may not.

The Power of Blogs

In the early days, the blogs were nothing but a form of a personal diary or journal that was easy to maintain and log daily. This was made possible due to the fact that the blogging platforms were freely available with free hosting and domain facilities, creating a blog was easy, and did not require any special technical skill or knowledge to post content. Therefore, anyone could open as many blogs as they wished, using the free templates provided, and maintain them very easily. It was a breeze to post content of any kind without too many hassles.

As the Internet evolved, so did the blog; making it a very powerful medium through which you could get your voice heard. Any individual could express strong opinions, suggestions and even provide useful up-to-date information through blogs. Even more attractive feature of a blog was the fact that one could interact directly with its readers in the form of comments that could be posted below the posts.

Blogs were an easy way to target specific audiences and also could be optimised, by virtue of the content posted, for it to be found on search engines. Another advantage of the blogs was that it was a comprehensive service, which offered a variety of tools and gadgets that made it versatile and user friendly.

Obviously, it did not take long for businesses to appreciate the full potential of a blog in attracting customers to its site and also providing a great platform to communicate with them directly. Some of the big business companies like Google realised this power, importance and effectiveness of the blog and incorporated it into their business strategy very effectively. These companies have shown how a blog can be used for different purposes like marketing, educating, community building, public relations, customer feedback and announcements etc.

Thus evolved the strategy of blogging for business, or using blogs effectively as a business tool. If the company website is thought of as a "*store front*" then the blog can be thought of as the "*salesperson, customer care, evangelist and a public relations officer*" all rolled into one. Why wouldn't anyone want that? Statistics show that the businesses that have blogs as an integral part of their social media strategy have shown more sales growth than the businesses that use social media without blogs.

In this book, it shall be our endeavour to discuss why blogs are an important business tool and how blogs can add value to any business in terms of *branding, credibility, achieving goals for the business or company, driving targeted traffic to generate inbound leads and getting conversions* in a very cheap and effective manner. We will also discuss the tools, which can help in measuring the performance of the blog and analysing the information effectively.

1 Basics of Blogs

Since this book deals with the topic of using blogs as an important and effective business tool and business blogging, it would do well to first understand a few basics of blogs. This includes its terminology, understanding its history or genesis, its classification, the reason for people to read and write blogs and also how a blog works.

1.1   What is a Blog?

A *Blog* is a contraction of the term '**Web Log**'. A log, as we all know, is the written record of events/messages in a chronological order. It is like a journal or diary wherein people record events, experiences and observations. Therefore, we can describe a *"blog"* as a journal, which is available on the web. Technically, a blog can be defined as the chronological arrangement of a collection of text, data, images and other media objects recorded and retrievable through a web browser. Originally, blogs started out as static websites but over the years they gradually evolved to include many advanced features making them much more conversational and interactive in nature.

Figure 1.1 Blogs

1.2   History of Blogs

Although digital communities existed before the blogs in the form of Usenet, Internet forums, email lists and Bulletin Board systems, Justin Hall, who began his blog, *Justin's Home page* in January 1994, is credited as the first blogger. Justin's Home Page, which later became *Links from the underground,* had links and reviews of websites in existence at that time. In 1996 Justin Hall began writing an online journal, which had dated entries, each entry linked through an index.

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The term weblog was coined and first used by Jorn Barger in 1997. In 1999, Peter Merholz, playing with the term used 'We Blog' on his blog and the term blog stuck.

Most early blogs were websites, which were being manually updated by the person maintaining the blog and knowledge of web technologies was essential if someone wanted to blog. However the developments in technology made it feasible for the non-technical people also to blog and that was the turning point in the history of Blogs.

Consider this, in the beginning of 1999; there were only 23 blogs as recorded by Jesse James Garrett, editor of Infosift. Jesse James forwarded this list to Cameron Barrett, who included the list on the sidebar of his blog "**Camworld.org**". Soon he started receiving URLs of similar sites maintained by other people. Suddenly a community started forming around these blogs, since it was easy to read all the blogs on his list. Subsequently, more and more people started their own blogs and the numbers grew rapidly.

In Jul 1999, Pitas launched the 'build your own weblog' tool, followed by Pyra Labs releasing *Blogger* in Aug 1999. Blogger caught the imagination of people and got blogging closer to the mainstream Internet users. The rapid growth turned into an explosion and blogging as a phenomenon had taken off. Today there are more than 150 million blogs in existence. Figure 1.2 shows the statistics of US blog readers from 2008-2014.
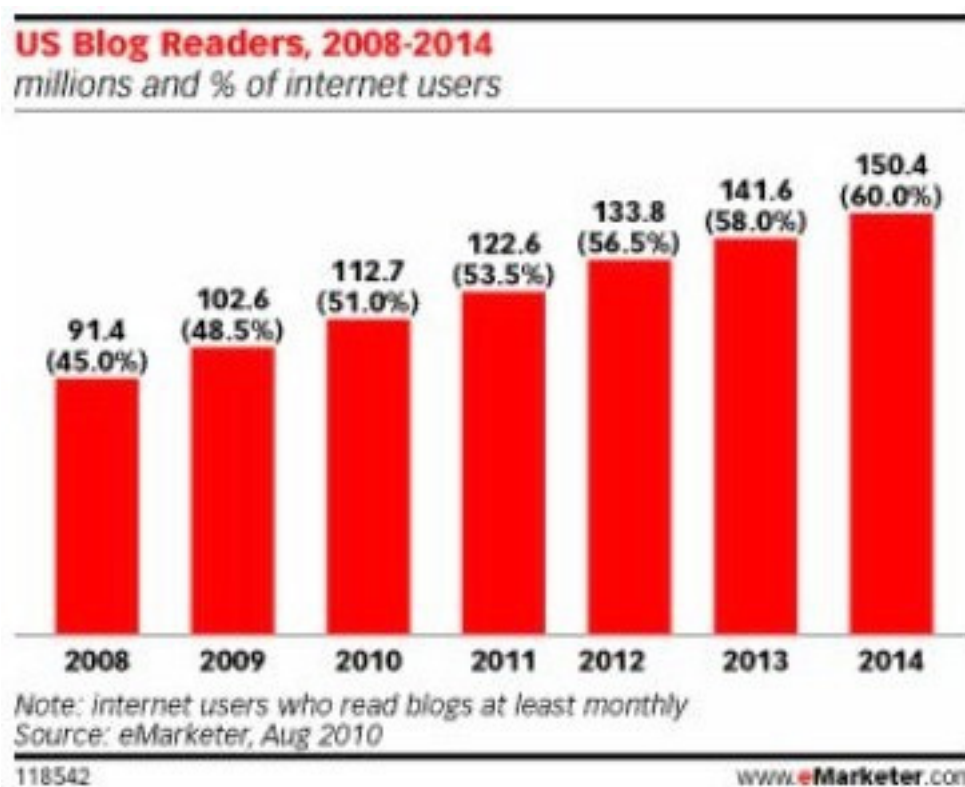

Figure 1.2 Statistics of US Blog Readers, 2008-2014

Starting out as just links to other pages or personal diaries, blogs today have evolved to facilitate inclusion of media-rich content, scripts and also many interactive features to allow a two-way communication between the blogger and the reader.

1.3   Classification of Blogs

Since blogs have been used in every conceivable way over the years and have covered almost all topics under the sun it is very difficult to categorize each one of them by type, therefore it's best to classify them instead. Blogs can be classified in one of the following ways: -

By Genre: Blogs that focus on a particular niche or subject are grouped under this category. Some examples are: **Political Blogs**, **Celebrity Blogs**, **Art Blogs**, **Music Blogs**, **Sports Blogs** or **Travel Blogs** etc.

By Media Type: Blogs can contain any kind of content other than simple text in its post, like photographs, videos, audio files or even games and therefore they can be grouped according to the specific media content present in the blogs. Using this form of classification, a blog that contains primarily videos is called a "**Vlog**", blog that contains photos is called a "**Photolog**" and a blog containing links to other web pages is called a "**Linklog**".

By Status of Publisher: Here the word "*publisher*" refers to the blogger. Therefore blogs can be grouped according to its purpose as defined by the blogger as "**Personal Blogs**", "**Business Blogs**", "**Corporate / Organizational Blogs**" etc.

1.4   Who Can Blog

Well, anyone can start a blog at anytime. However, the idea is not just to start a blog and leave it at that but to be able to sustain it, and be read too. To become a serious blogger, there are certain things that one needs to know before a blog is started.

Blogging involves extensive writing and so be sure that you have enough time to spare to be able to keep up with regular postings on your blog. You can write anything that fancies your imagination or interests. Usually blogs are written in an informal tone, especially if they are personal blogs, however, if they are for business or official purposes, then the writing has to be of a higher quality and sound professional. The quality of the content on your blogs will determine the kind of traffic it will draw.

Knowledge and passion for writing are both important factors. It is always better to write about topics that you have knowledge of and are passionate about as it is reflected in your writing. Even the most seasoned writers find it difficult to write on topics that they have no knowledge about. Be passionate about writing if you want it to be a long haul, otherwise you will find yourself slipping away after a few months.

Maintaining a blog is a long-term activity that can be quite time consuming. To be a successful blogger requires a lot of consistency, hard work and commitment on your part. Many blogs that have been started in full earnest fall by the wayside just because people cannot stick to the schedules they have set for themselves.

Writing new articles or posts requires a lot of research to be done unless of course, you are a specialist in your field and know exactly what you are writing about. A lot of time is also required to promote your blog and individual posts in order to get traffic. But, all said and done, just about anyone can start a blog and there is no special qualification or experience needed.

1.5   Why do People Read/Write Blogs

As we pointed out earlier, the simplistic features of a blog made it easier for individuals to start blogging and they did so for any number of reasons, be it as an extension of their passion / hobby, an outlet for expression of thought, to share information, opinions and knowledge or maybe just for fun. However, the underlying reason for reading or writing blogs remained the same: to be a part of a community. A place where they could have a sense of belonging, could gain respect from others as individuals, could express their thoughts without the fear of being judged, could contribute and where their voice would be heard.

This aspect of human nature evolves from real life, wherein people tend to form groups or communities based on the similarities of their caste, religion, ethnic backgrounds, or common interests etc. Humans being social in nature, have an innate desire to find other people that they can relate to and thereafter form a network of sorts from which they can gather all kinds of information and feedback relating to the real world. Therefore, if a person had to buy a product, he/she would rely on the direct feedback of the people within his/her network of friends or colleagues instead of relying on information given by sales persons or evangelists.

Since blogs are written and maintained mostly by individuals for their personal reasons or passions, it is much easier to believe in the content as being honest and sincere in nature rather than believing in a celebrity endorsement or a magazine review for that matter.

Of course, there are many other reasons for people to blog, which includes making money, self-promotion, connecting with their fans, gaining popularity or becoming famous or simply because they love to write. Whatever the reason may be, at the heart of it all, it is getting into or keeping in touch with a community. Blogs allow this in a very simplistic and discrete manner and that is why they have such a large following.

1.6   How Does a Blog Work

So far you have been reading about creating and writing blogs, but have you wondered about how this is made possible? What are the elements that go into the whole process of blogging? Well, there are three distinct elements that are involved in the process of blogging, which are: **Blogging Client, Blogging Platform** and **Blogging Host**.

Blogging Client: The *Blogging client* is an application that allows the blogger to post content and edit it with the help of a text editor. The text editor may also have some add-on features that allow the addition of pictures, photos or videos to their posts. Here, the blogger does not have to bother about creating web pages in HTML, as everything is included in the application. In other words, it is an application that allows the blogger to post, edit, format and perform a variety of functions for a blog without launching a browser.

There are two types of *Blogging Clients* available, one where you need to post content online, e.g. **Blogger.com** and two where you can post content offline, e.g. **Flock**, **Windows Live Writer**, **Drivel**, **WBlogger** and many more. An offline blogging client is something similar to an email client like Outlook Express. See Figure 1.3.
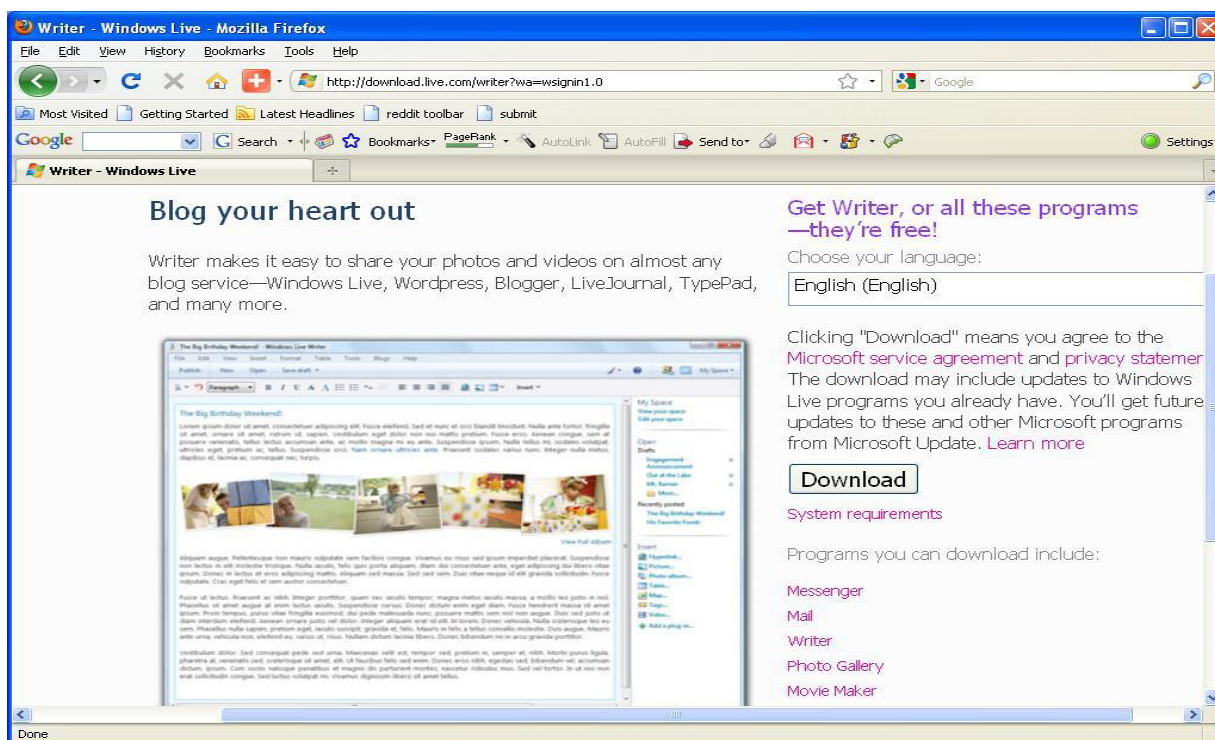

Figure 1.3 Windows Live Writer

Blogging Platform: Behind the blogging client is the software, which contains the code that helps you perform all the tasks explained above. It can be called the backend of the blogging client. The *Blogging platform* is hosted on a server along with the add-ons that include the software languages like PHP, ASP etc used for creation of the client as well as the database like MySQL that stores all the content that is created with the help of the client. The code helps in creation and the presentation of the blog as well.

According to PC world, the top five Blogging Platforms are **Google Blogger**, **Wordpress**, **Six Apart Typepad**, **Tripod** and **Squarespace**.

Blogging Host: Every site on the Internet needs to be hosted on a web server. Unless a page or a website is uploaded on a web Server it is not available online. A *Web Host* is the entity that offers the web space and web server to publish and deliver web pages. Similarly, a *Blog host* is the host or a server that goes one step further and installs the blogging platform and relevant add-ons.

With a *Blog host*, a blogger is freed from the task of installing, configuring and maintaining the modules that make up the back-end of the blog. For example, **Google Blogger** is a **Blog Host** available online where anyone can create a blog very easily in three steps and is automatically hosted on the Google server at **Blogspot.com**. See Figure 1.4.
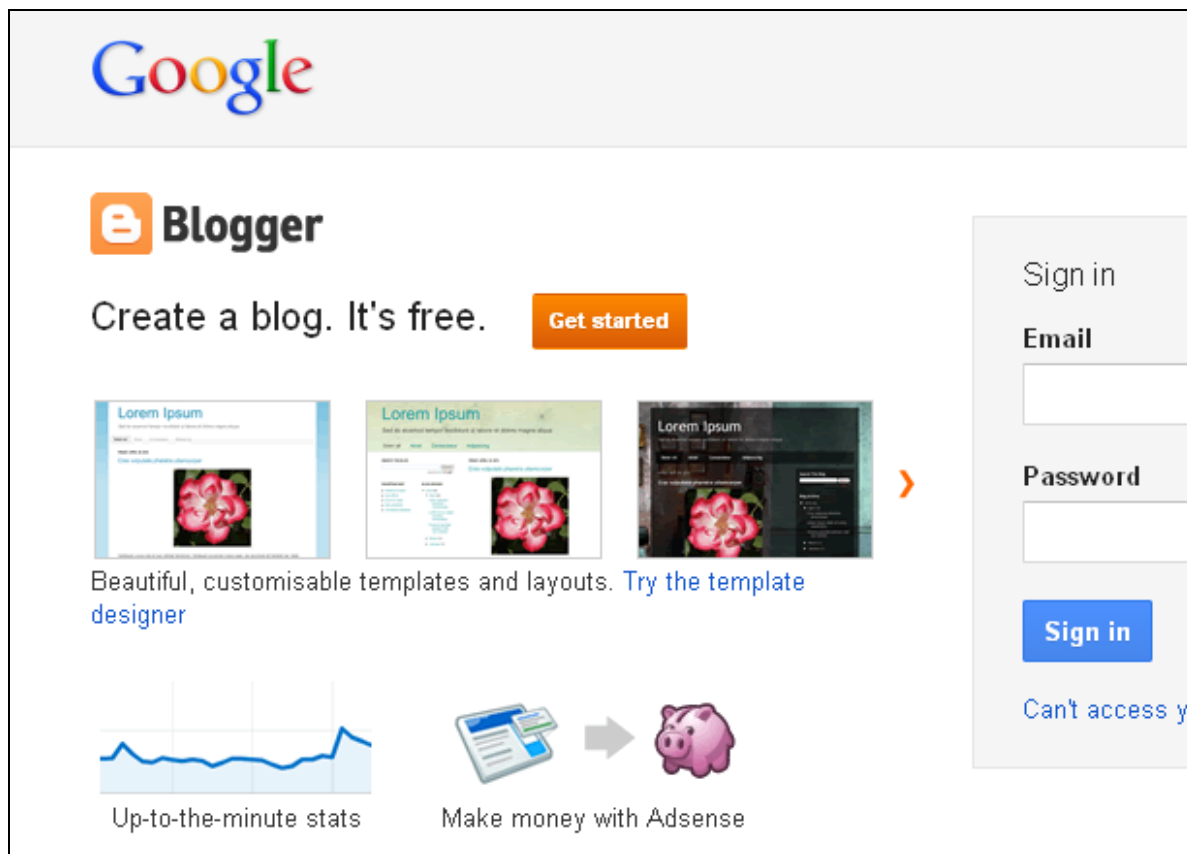

Figure 1.4 Google Blogger (Blogspot.com)

A blog can always be configured to a new web address (new domain name) or server should you choose to do so at a later date when your blog gets popular and you want to upgrade it to a proper website with a "www" address.

2 Business Blogs

Whether you are a small or big business, a company or a corporate, an individual proprietor or even a shop owner, it doesn't matter because blogs are a phenomenon that you just cannot ignore, postpone, or delegate. Given the changes that are barrelling down upon us, blogs are not a business elective anymore. They have become a pre-requisite. So let's take a look at business blogs.

2.1   What is a Business Blog?

Wikipedia defines a business blog (b-blog) as, "*a corporate weblog that is published and used by an organization to reach its organizational goals. The advantage of blogs is that posts and comments are easy to reach and follow due to centralized hosting and generally structured conversation threads.*"

Techopedia defines a business blog (b-blog) as, "*a blog of published, informal online articles that are either included in a company's internal communications system (intranet) or posted on the Internet for the public to read.*

Business blogs use a more personal tone than corporate websites and are primarily used for public relations purposes.

A business blog may also be referred to as a corporate blog or corporate Web log."

In other words, a business blog can be described as a communication tool that allows business owners to communicate directly with their clients or customers. Used correctly, in alignment with the stated objectives, a blog can be used for branding, spreading awareness of the products or services and creating a buzz around them, building credibility and reputation as a subject matter expert or industry leader, customer and media relations, exchange of knowledge/ ideas/ opportunities with like minded professionals, building a community around the products /services and testing or creating support for business/product ideas by getting the market reactions.

2.2   Categories of Business Blogs

Business blogs can be categorized as either **external** or **internal**.

The **internal business blog** is a web log that can be accessed through the company's Intranet and can be viewed by any of its employees. These blogs are generally informal in nature, thereby encouraging participation by the employees, free discussion of issues and collective intelligence that serves as a source of direct communication between different layers of an organization and also helps to build a sense of community within the company. It generally uses RSS feeds to promulgate content to its employees.

The **external business blogs** is a publicly available weblog that serves as a platform for communications for the business or company. It can be used to announce new products or services to its customers, clarify business policies, react to criticisms offered by the public on certain issues, educating customers about products and a lot more.

The advantage of a business blog is that it offers a glimpse into the internal work environment of the company that may not be evident from its corporate website.

According to a study published by the Centre for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, in January 2011, 50 percent of Fortune 500 companies maintained a blog in 2010.

2.3   Positive Indicators to Start a Business Blog

Unlike a website or a business function, a blog is quick to set up and involves negligible costs. It is versatile and simple to use. The content can be updated regularly.

A blog can easily be integrated with the existing traditional functions of the business. A blog can be used to either carry out a function or support the offline functions like marketing/ PR/ customer relations etc.

Maintenance of a blog is a simple activity and does not need a geek or an expert to handle it. In fact, many businesses have their employees doubling up as bloggers for the business.

Blogs are not intrusive unlike some other forms of marketing like emails, cold telemarketing calls and newsletters. In this case, the customer is coming to your blog and hence you would not be intruding into his space. This by itself is a strong indicator that he will spend a longer time at understanding what you are offering.

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3 Why Businesses Should Blog

Now that we have been introduced to business blogs, let us explore the reasons why a business should have a blog. A business blog can be used as a cheap, effective and targeted source of marketing on the web and can represent the business in the best possible manner to a targeted audience, or its customers. Listed below are some of the primary reasons why businesses should blog.

Affordable Marketing: All businesses need promotion and marketing of their brand as well as products/services. Traditionally, it came in the form of advertisements in TV/Print media, brochures, pamphlets, trade shows, surveys etc. However, most of these methods are quite expensive and inflate the bottom line of the company to a large extent.

A blog on the other hand, is relatively cheaper to establish and manage. While most blogging services are free to use, some of them are paid but even they are not that expensive. Compare this with traditional means of advertising and marketing and you are spending nothing or a miniscule part of your marketing budget to use the opportunity.

The traditional marketing also has the disadvantage of scale. The higher the number of customers you are trying to reach, the larger in scale your campaign needs to be, which directly reflects as enhanced costs. How many people are actually touched by the campaign is anybody's guess.

In case of a blog, since most people landing on the blog would have either come through a search engine or through a referring page on the web, one can be certain that these people are currently looking for information on the particular subject / product, or are at least interested in them, thereby giving you an audience waiting to be tapped. The very fact that a person is reading your blog means that he/she is a potential client. Thus we can say that blogs are definitely a more targeted effort than the conventional means.

Business blogs can be used to spread the word regarding your business by educating your prospective customers about your products and how best they can serve their needs. They can also be used to handle their queries and concerns. Blogs promote relational marketing thereby fostering trust in your customers. The interactive natures of blogs allow user feedback, which is great for testing ideas and new products thereby assisting the business in market research.

Starting Conversations/Creating a Buzz: Every business desires to be in the public memory for as long as possible. The only way that can be achieved is by getting people to talk about it in some context or the other. It could be the quality of your products / services or it could be the buzz about your latest offering. People will not discuss a business just because it exists, but because it has something different, interesting or unique to offer. Conversations or discussions need an idea / knowledge to get started and informing and educating people can provide the same.

Blogs provide a very good platform for initiating conversations with people and stimulating their intellect. If you succeed in doing that people will discuss the topic beyond the blog thus creating a buzz for your brand or products translating into word-of-mouth advertising for your business.

A blog can also be used to share information like discounts, special offers, customer stories or testimonials and for holding contests. This helps in retaining the interest of customers and keeps the conversation going.

Lending a Human Face to the Business: No one likes speaking to a machine, nor does anyone like speaking to strangers. It is mainly so because the element of trust is missing. So many people detest telemarketers for the same reason. Similarly, people find it difficult to deal with or do business with faceless corporations or businesses. The snazzy brochures and celebrity endorsements no longer sway them. They want to deal with real people, who can inform them, educate them and help them make decisions. Would you buy a product from a person who himself is not aware of how it works?

Businesses realize this and have been looking for ways and means to get closer to their customers. Customer feedback forms, direct selling and personal sales calls serve the purpose to some extent but even then a lot depends on the capability and experience of the person making the call and it again becomes an expensive time consuming proposition.

A business blog on the other hand can give complete, authentic information to the customers about what they want to know, from a single location, at the time of their convenience. The conversational nature of blogs lends a human face to the business. Blog posts can be descriptive and convincing, explaining in detail why the product or service is of use to the reader. The prospective customer can then engage in the conversation if he/she is interested to know more.

Highlighting Business Expertise or Leadership: There is enough competition in the market for each and every business line. No doubt your product will speak for itself, but only if someone uses it. Therefore, in order to start selling your products, you need to not only inform and educate your customers about your products, but also tell them about your expertise in the subject area. You need to display your understanding of the needs of the people and you need to talk about how you are improving your products or processes to achieve better utilization. You need to tell the customers that you are in touch with the latest in the respective technology and have the capability of implementing the same to serve the customers.

Blogs again provide a platform where you can achieve all the above and maybe more. When you blog about existing technologies, new developments and the future of the industry it highlights you as an expert in the field and also establishes you as a thought leader. Why you are better than the competition is what people want to know and you need to use every opportunity to tell them.

By establishing your expertise, you also become an industry influencer, with the media and other bloggers in the same field following your blog and quoting you. This leads to greater exposure for your blog and also your business.

Search Engine Optimisation: There are a host of companies and their websites vying for the coveted place in the first few pages of the search results. Therefore, unless people already know your brand, they would not be able to find your website or business easily if it does not appear in the first few pages of the search results. Advertising online or otherwise can make things easier for you, but it costs money. Optimising a website for search is much more painstaking than optimising a blog. Websites have to be kept lean and one cannot keep updating it every now and then.

Search engines thrive on fresh content and blogs are the perfect way to offer it to them, thereby having your blog rank higher on the search engine result pages (SERPs). By simply integrating the blog with the website you can get the website to get indexed more frequently, thus getting higher rankings.

Attracting and Retaining Customers: Most people use search engines to educate themselves on finding the best solution for their needs and also to find an appropriate provider for them. Blogs offer the opportunity for a business to be found based on search terms used by the customer and result in targeted quality leads. If your blog content is attractive and satisfies the learning needs of people, they will keep coming back for more and ultimately lead into a conversion, thus increasing sales. A good blog also gets linked to by other bloggers, which generates more traffic for your blog. In addition if a reader finds your blog post interesting, it is likely that he would share it with his friends/colleagues.

Blogs can also be used to retain customers by satisfying their need to know more and to be involved. Many businesses use blogs to help their customers by providing solutions to any issues they might be having with their products. This can be done by means of putting up *Frequently Asked Questions* (FAQs) or *how to* posts and even basic troubleshooting guides.

Staying Connected / Building Trust: Businesses need to stay connected to their customers, investors, shareholders and employees. The flow of information is very important to maintain transparency and elicit the trust of the stakeholders. Over a period of time, by talking about various aspects of the business, the business owners can actually open out to the stakeholders and lay all their cards on the table. This transparency about who you are, what you do and why you do it can help build trust which goes a long way in developing long lasting relationships.

Blogs are the perfect means of staying connected with everyone and giving them information about what they need to know at a comfortable pace without having to call for meetings or sending out a deluge of letters/emails.

4 Benefits of Business Blogs

In the last chapter we discussed why businesses should blog. Now let's look at some of the benefits of a business blog. A blog can add many dimensions to a business, thereby adding more value to it and increasing its worth, in terms of brand value, customer relations, targeting the right people/audience, managing the online reputation of the business, sharing content/information and also in community building/development and much more. They are as follows:

Branding: With an ever-growing population that is relying more and more on online research before taking their decision to buy a product or service, a business blog can be used not only to create brand awareness but also to position the company as the business leader and a '*must consider*' resource thus generating more business for the company. A blog helps to confirm credibility, deliver the message clearly and also motivates the prospective buyer to connect emotionally with the brand. The company name and/or logo on the blog further strengthen the image of a business every time someone visits the blog. This has a positive impact on their memory in relation to the information they have gathered from the blog.

Targeted Audience: People visiting a business blog don't just land up there out of the blue. They come there through the search engines or through some referral link, which means that they are interested in finding information about the products that the business is dealing with. The possibility of converting such prospects into taking action is tremendous and a good blog can do wonders. Having a call-to-action option on the blog leads the visitor further into the sales process. It could simply be subscribing to your newsletter, if you have one, or guiding them to your website for more information.

Differentiating Your Business from Competition: Without being very blunt about it, you can use a blog to show how your business stands apart from the competition and is beneficial for the customer. Statements on a public forum will more likely convey your conviction and belief in your own products. Making your blog resource and information rich also makes it something like a content centre and people will not find the need to go elsewhere. This keeps you and your business visible.

Building Relationships: Acquiring new customers costs much more than retaining existing ones. Your blog readers are likely to be your best customers or quality leads. A blog allows you to interact directly with them and get to know them and gives tremendous insight into their minds, their needs and their challenges. Blogs also help in improving customer satisfaction because the customers feel that the business is listening to them and develop an emotional connection with the business, which is integral to enhancing customer trust and loyalty.

Public Relations / Reputation Management: A business blog can be used for crisis management in the event of a bad press or negative story going around. It becomes an outlet to let the public know your side of the story and also that you care. Moreover, if a situation develops, you do not have to wait for a press conference or an interview to tell your side, you can issue statements and updates online through the business blog in real-time.

A blog also gives a platform for customers to touch base with the business if they have a grievance. In such a case it is likely that the customers would try to first air their grievance on that platform rather than bad mouth the business on some other forum.

Getting Linked: Other websites, forums and blogs around the world will automatically link to a blog that is authoritative and has educative posts on its chosen subject or topic. These links add value to the blog and gets more quality, targeted readers to it. Most readers, when they find something really good, also share interesting content with their friends and colleagues, either directly through email or through other social media.

Sharing: Compared to the other social media, which restrict content to within the service, blog posts can be shared across all social media including social networks, forums, social bookmarking websites, article directories etc. This gives a blog an enormous reach that a business can use to its advantage.

Community Development: As the readership of the business blog grows you can actually build a community around it, where readers can also share their thoughts and opinions about the products or the business. Such interaction will forge a sense of community amongst the readers. This can be encouraged by asking/answering questions, holding contests, starting a group activity etc.

Enhanced Approachability: Businesses do have their contact details available at many places and even though everyone knows that a mail sent to, let's say, "*customerservice@xyz.com*" will ultimately be read by a person, they are not entirely sure whether it will be acted upon. However, people feel more confident about getting a response if they leave a comment on the blog post or send a mail to the blogger. This just goes on to show how blogs present a humane, approachable face to the customers.

Presenting the Good Side: Blogs also give you the opportunity to present details of your community initiatives or the charity work you have done. Splashing it in the media without occasion might sound brash and arrogant, but doing so in the course of maintaining a blog presents a more subtle approach to let everyone know about the good side of the business.

Self Promotion: Although people frown at reckless promotion on a blog, no one minds a little self-promotion every now and then. So there's absolutely no harm in using the business blog to announce product launches, events and newsworthy items with respect to the business.

Industry Contacts: Maintaining a good and compelling business blog makes it easier for like-minded people from the industry, including those from the competition, to find the blog and make a connection. In a business, all relationships are desirable and in the longer run each one helps you to enhance your business. A business blog can also help you find and forge relationships with vendors, suppliers and other people in the industry. This can also lead to new business partnerships.

Up to Speed: If there is a new development in your field of expertise and you respond to it with a post on your blog, people will know that you are up to speed and in touch with the latest technologies and developments. This will fetch incredible points for your business.

Business Blog as a Website: If your business does not have a website as yet, you can easily get a blog to work like one. Almost all the blogging platforms allow you to make static pages that can be used to host your website related content.

5 Planning The Business Blog

In the preceding chapters we established the importance and the impact that a blog can have upon the growth and prosperity of a business online. There is absolutely no doubt that business blogs are here to stay and so whether you like it or not, if you have a business then you need to have a business blog. But wait! Like any other project, the first step to successful implementation of any action is *planning*. Therefore, in order to have a good business blog, you need to have a good plan so that you know exactly what you are getting into, what you want out of your blog or what you would like to convey through your blog and in what manner you would like things to be presented to your target audience.

Thus, before you jump into creating a business blog, consider if you are going to stick to it for long as creating and maintaining a blog takes a considerable amount of time and effort. So let's consider the factors that go into planning a business blog.

Does Your Business Need a Blog: Well, we have already concluded that all businesses, big or small can benefit immensely with a business blog. Therefore, the question here is really not whether your business *needs* a blog, but whether your business needs a blog "*at this particular time*". In other words, are you ready to handle a blog along with all the other functions of the business, at this point in time?

Blogging may be an inexpensive mode of communicating with your market but it still requires time, people to blog, research and promotion. Therefore, if you are not going to able to maintain a good, compelling blog and update it regularly, due to whatever reasons, you might as well not spend time starting it. Remember, not having a blog is still better than having a bad blog.

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Having said that, the above issues are just challenges that can easily be overcome with commitment, multi-tasking or by outsourcing.

Developing Strategy: A blogging strategy needs to be defined which will answer the why's, how's, what's, when's and where's with respect to the blog. A defined strategy will give direction and purpose to the blog and put everyone involved on the same page. Moreover, it is important that all departments and people in the organization know about the blog to maximize its utility and to facilitate the flow of information and approvals.

Define Objectives: The objectives of starting a business blog need to be defined right at the beginning. This would not only help you get more effective results from your business blog, but also lend direction to the people who are blogging. The objectives could be one or more of the following:

a) Building thought leadership – Establishing expertise
b) Increasing brand awareness
c) Driving demand – generate sales leads
d) Engaging customers
e) Public relation/customer service
f) Boost Search engine optimisation

The list is not exhaustive and you can set your own objectives. However, just make sure that your blogging objectives are aligned to your business goals. Also make sure that the objectives are defined and **SMART** i.e. *Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic* and *Time-bound.*

Do Research: Research will simplify and lend more focus to your efforts at blogging. Firstly you need to research your competitors and how they are blogging. Surely you do not want to end up inadvertently copying some aspect of your competitor's blog. Moreover your business blog needs to be unique in terms of the design as well as the content. Knowing what the competition is doing will help you make your blog different and better.

Research will also indicate who your target audience is, the knowledge of which is essential towards formulating the content and the manner of writing. This is important in terms of how the business is perceived by the readers of the blog.

Who will Blog: Whether it will be a single person blogging or it will be a team is for you to decide. However the person/s selected should have some authority in the subject matter, have good knowledge about your industry, should have good writing skills, be cool headed and above all be passionate. The goal is to establish credibility and a well-written blog as well as the credentials of the author go a long way in doing that. If your business can afford it, you may also consider training your bloggers for SEO, blogging etiquette, promotion etc.

Frequency of Posts: It is essential to define the frequency of posting on the blog. As we have already said, business blogging requires perseverance and time to develop a readership. If the blog posts are not written regularly, it is difficult to retain readership. Do not leave it to the designated author's convenience otherwise the regularity of the posts will keep slipping. Please note that we are not using the word frequently, we are using the term regularly. Having a very high frequency of posting may lead to poor quality, run of the mill content. At the same time, having too much gap between posts will not generate the enthusiasm in your reader to subscribe or keep checking your blog for more.

Content Strategy: Rather than leave it to the blogger, it is desirable that the content strategy; i.e. what will form part of content on the blog is laid out. Blog posts can be about company news, industry news, product reviews, case studies, events, instructional posts etc. Whatever you do select, it is important that the post offers a fresh perspective on the subject and has something to offer to the reader by way of education or knowledge. This is especially true if you have picked up the subject from another blog or maybe a news channel.

Comment Policy: It is best to allow comments on the blog posts to establish a two-way communication and sustain the dialogue. However two things need to be laid out clearly. First, it has to be made amply clear to the readers and the bloggers that spam and foul language will not be tolerated. Secondly there has to be a mechanism to handle comments especially the negative ones. You can't always keep deleting negativity from your blog; at times negative comments need to be responded with clarifications, or the person commenting needs to be engaged to understand what is wrong. Clearly, other departments may need to be involved in such a scenario and a policy for escalating or processing such comments needs to be in place.

Defining Performance Indicators: The beginning is a good time to define the performance indicators in respect of the blog. It could be number of visitors to the blog, number of subscribers to the feed, number of leads generated, positioning of content in search results, number of comments etc. The blogger/s need to have tangible objectives, which they are working towards and will maybe put in more effort to learn more on how to improve their own work.

Monitoring: A monitoring team or a process needs to be set up, which can monitor and evaluate the performance of the blog. The blog has been established with specific objectives and is of no use if the objectives are not being achieved. The evaluation of the blog performance can help in giving the necessary course correction in terms of content, tweaking the design or promotion of the blog online.

6 Creating a Business Blog

Once the planning stage is over and done with; the goals, objectives, marketing strategy and policies are clear and defined, it becomes easier to create and start a business blog. The next step involves creating the blog, but for that you need to first find an appropriate blogging service and platform that would serve and fulfil all your requirements as much as possible and offer you the best analytic tools, applications, widgets or gadgets that are easy to operate and manage within the blog.

6.1 Choosing a Blogging Service

Out of a host of blogging service options available online choosing the most appropriate one would depend upon the consideration of the following: -

1. What is the long-term strategy of your business blog?
2. How technologically savvy you are or if you can get technical support.
3. Whether you would want to host your blog on own server or use the hosting service provided by the blogging platform.
4. Cost factor – cheap or expensive.

Since business blogging is a long-term process, it is essential to think about a few years down the road, while choosing a blogging platform. Although it is technically possible to change the platform anytime later and also to transfer all the content to the new platform, doing so could end up being a troublesome affair and may also cost time and money. Moreover, changing over to a new domain or blogging service would result in a loss of all the reputation and the online ranking that the previous blog had achieved, in addition to any inbound links that were generated from other web pages.

Since all blogging platforms have a different learning curve, for a beginner, it makes sense to start with the easiest one. However, this would not be an issue for experienced bloggers or in case the work is being outsourced.

Some blogging services offer domain names and hosting along with the platform while others offer only the platform. In addition to the money there are certain pros and cons of hosted and standalone services.

- **Hosted Blog Platforms** like *Blogger*, *Wordpress.com* and *Live Journal* are the cheapest and simplest to start with since they offer domain name and hosting as well. These platforms provide you with basic templates that are easy to set up and also for adding and publishing blog posts.

  The main advantage of these hosted blog platforms is that they are kept updated with the latest software or technology and any bugs in the system are taken care of automatically, therefore it takes care of all your headaches of keeping abreast of technological advances.

  However, the disadvantages of a hosted blog are few: mainly not having full control over it and also the fact that one ends up using a sub domain of the service instead of your own domain, although here they do offer the choice to point the blog to any other domain of choice. They are also less configurable and making design changes in the template requires one to be tech-savvy. As a result, most blogs end up looking like clones of others.

- **The Standalone Platforms** like *Wordpress.org*, *Movable Type* and *Squarespace* offers its users a full control of the design, own domain name and also the use of various plug-ins to enhance the blog, but here the downside is that they are relatively difficult to set up, cost money for the domain name / hosting and every time there is a new software release it needs to be updated.
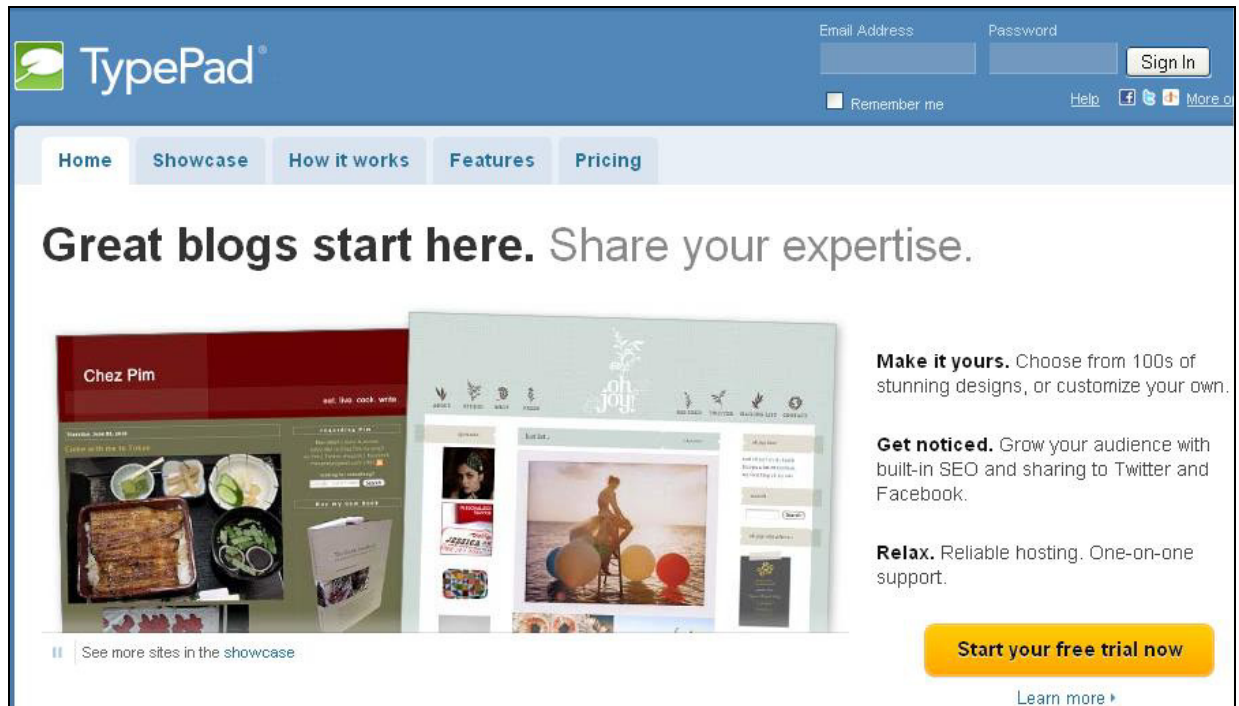
Figure 6.1 Blogging Platform - TypePad

For beginners and those with low budgets we recommend *Blogger.com* (Figure 1.3) or *Wordpress.com*. Those with some experience and who want to use customisation and advanced features *Movable Type*, *TypePad* (Figure 6.1) or *Wordpress. org* will be better. To Blogger's credit, Google is hosting all its blogs on Blogger and they are serving its objectives. (Figures 6.2 and 6.3 show the blogging platforms WordPress.com and WordPress.org).
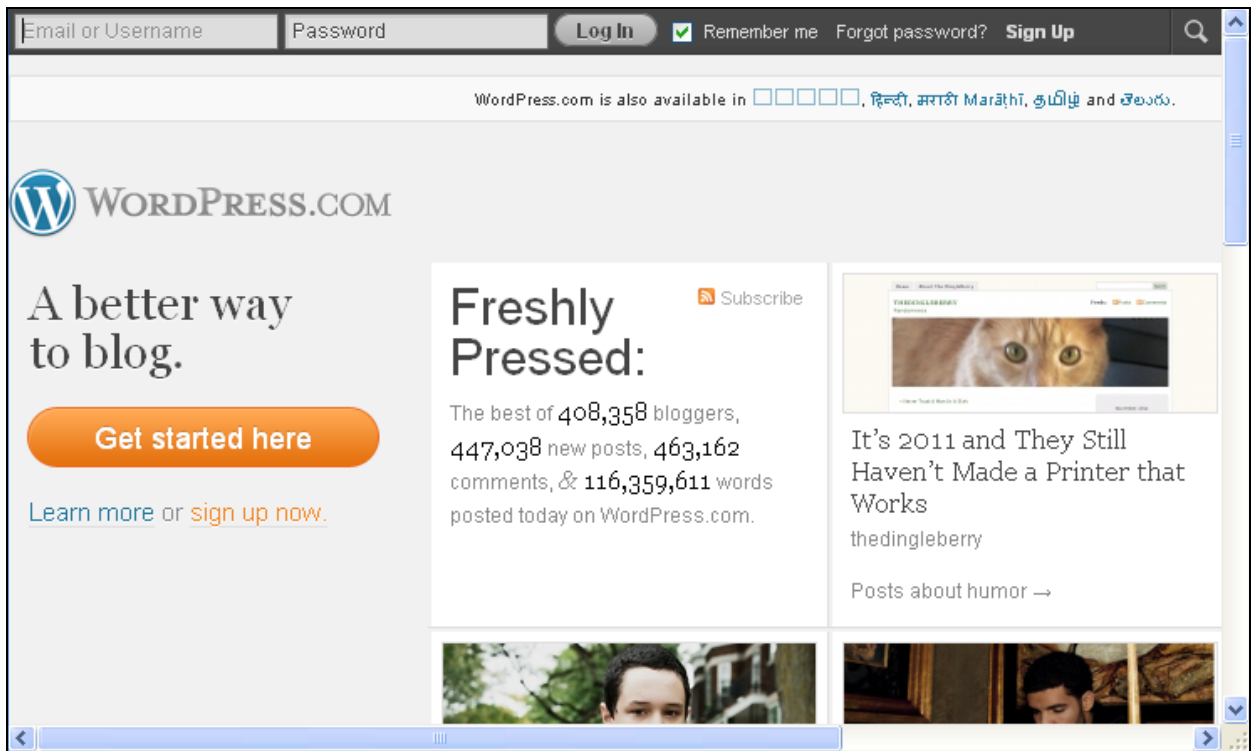
Figure 6.2 Blogging Platform - WordPress.com

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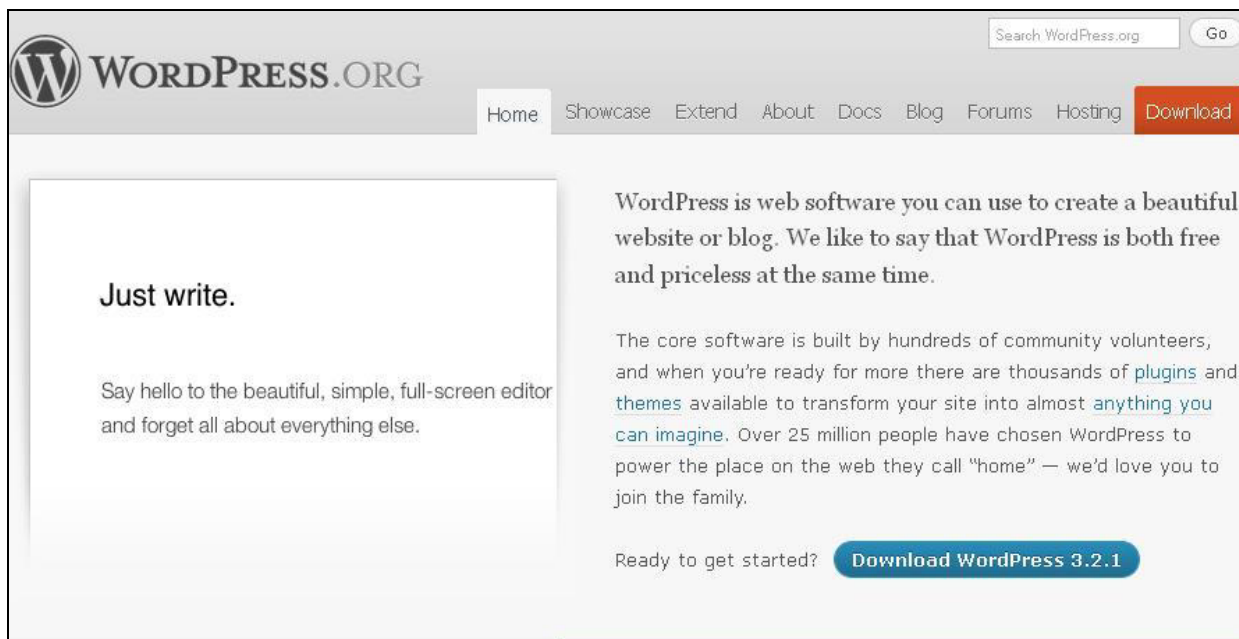
Figure 6.3 Blogging Platform - WordPress.org

6.2   Creating the Blog

Getting started with one of the free-hosted platforms is very simple. The first step involves signing up or registration to be able to use the services and thereafter proceeding to the next step of creating the blog. Most of the steps are self explanatory and helpful explanations exist against each to help you make choices.

However, before creating the blog, one needs to decide the type of design or layout that the business blog must have, so as to meet its objective. For example, a business that involves shopping online or is a music store will want a different kind of home page and layout for its blog as compared to a business that offers some kind of consultation or services. The basic themes for both the businesses are entirely different and should be reflected in the type of blog template selected for it.

Design: Most blogging services offer a collection of free templates to choose from. Choose the most appropriate one to suit the objectives of the blog. If the blog is to be integrated with the business website, see if you can match the theme and colour scheme with the templates provided, or one can even make minor changes to the template by editing the HTML, that is if you are familiar with HTML coding. This will ensure continuity of the brand you are trying to establish. Make sure that there is just the right amount of white space on the blog to make it look neat and not look too cluttered.

Layout: Most blog hosts do not offer many options as far as the layout of the posts are concerned, but you do have the choice of adding a sidebar on the left/ right or both sides. A sidebar on the right or left works best for most people, but feel free to use your own imagination to have the kind of layout that would suit the needs of your business blog.

The sidebar comes handy to include navigation tools for your blog that could be in the form of links or tabs. One could also include third-party widgets or HTML in the sidebar to further enhance the utility of the blog.

6.3   Other Essential Elements of a Blog

Over the years, blogging services have become much more professional than they used to be and there are many ways to make your blog look interesting while providing resources to your readers to enhance their experience of having come to your blog. We will discuss the blog enhancements in a later chapter, however, there are certain other elements that are also equally essential to a blog and one might as well do a good job of doing this right.

Domain Name: Most blogging platforms allow you to have a sub-domain that is a component of their own domain name, like for example *bestshoes.blogspot.com*. However, it is always better to have a custom domain name for your blog. The *Domain Name* (the unique part of your URL or the web address) should indicate what the blog is about and whom it belongs to. If you have a website, then it is easy to assign a sub-domain to the blog. If not, then be careful in selecting the domain name for your blog so that the URL signifies either the brand or the business it represents.

Title: Most people arriving on a web page through a search engine will not look at the URL but the header, i.e. title of the page. You need to have a catchy title that stands out on the page. If you have a business logo, include that as well. This will ensure that the title will embed itself in the mind of the visitor. As is standard practice, both humans and search engines read the page from top left to right bottom, so it makes sense to put the title on the top left of the page.

Post Headline: Anything you post on the blog needs to have a title that tells the visitors what you are writing about. The title should catch the essence of the entire article and be able to stand by itself. Most platforms will make the post title stand out, but if they don't, make sure that they are bolder and larger.

Post: Obviously this is the most important part of the blog, the one that the visitors to your blog are interested in. The post should be educational, informative and written in a conversational style. The content and quality of the post is what gets the reader to explore your blog further and maybe come back for more.

Date/Timestamp: An integral part of the software, each post needs to be time stamped in order to archive it in the proper place. Most blogging platforms will do it automatically provided they are made aware of your correct region.

Comments: If you want to engage and interact with the readers, the only way to do so is to allow them to comment on your blog posts. Many bloggers make the mistake of not allowing comments and in the process make it a one-way communication channel and frankly no one is interested in your views if you are not interested in theirs.

Archives: Whatever you post on the blog involves effort and why would you not want your readers to access the content posted in the past. There are many ways to allow that. Since you want to engage your reader make sure that there is either a chronological archive of your earlier posts or a tag index which allows the visitor to see all the posts related to the keyword of his choice or you can make some arrangement to display related posts (posts related to the topic of the current post) for the visitor to explore your blog further.

Feed: Providing a prominent link to the RSS or Atom Feed of blog posts in the side bar is probably the best way to get people to "*subscribe*" to your blog content. This is helpful for individuals and other blogs or websites that may have liked your content, style of writing or may simply want to be updated on the content of your blog. The "*Subscribe to:*" link is generally available at the bottom of each post in any blog.

About: This is probably the smallest but the most important part of a blog. The visitors are curious to know who is writing the content, what his qualifications are and what makes him the expert on the subject. Therefore, efforts should be made to have a detailed profile of the blogger including his position in the business. In case of a business blog, it also needs to be indicated that it is the official blog of the business.

Contact Information: For a business blog it is essential to highlight the different ways that the readers can contact anyone or someone in the business by providing adequate details of either the mailing address, phone numbers /e-mail or a simple contact us form that can be filled and submitted from within the blog. A link to the company website should be placed in a prominent location on the page. If there are any social media accounts, these can be displayed as well, so that the readers can follow your activity on those accounts too.

Apart from these essential elements, there are many other tools available to help you enhance your blog further, but those will be elaborated upon in the succeeding chapters.

7 Start Blogging

Once the business blog is created including the layout and its settings, content can be posted quite easily using the text editor provided by most blogging platforms. The blogger and wordpress editors are shown below in Figures 7.1 and 7.2 respectively. The text editors provided in different blogging platforms may differ slightly from one another, but are easy to understand and use allowing the flexibility to write and publish content instantly. Most editors will automatically save the post being created as a draft at regular intervals and it is not necessary for the post to be completed and published in one go. The content can be published at your convenience when you feel that it is complete in all respects.
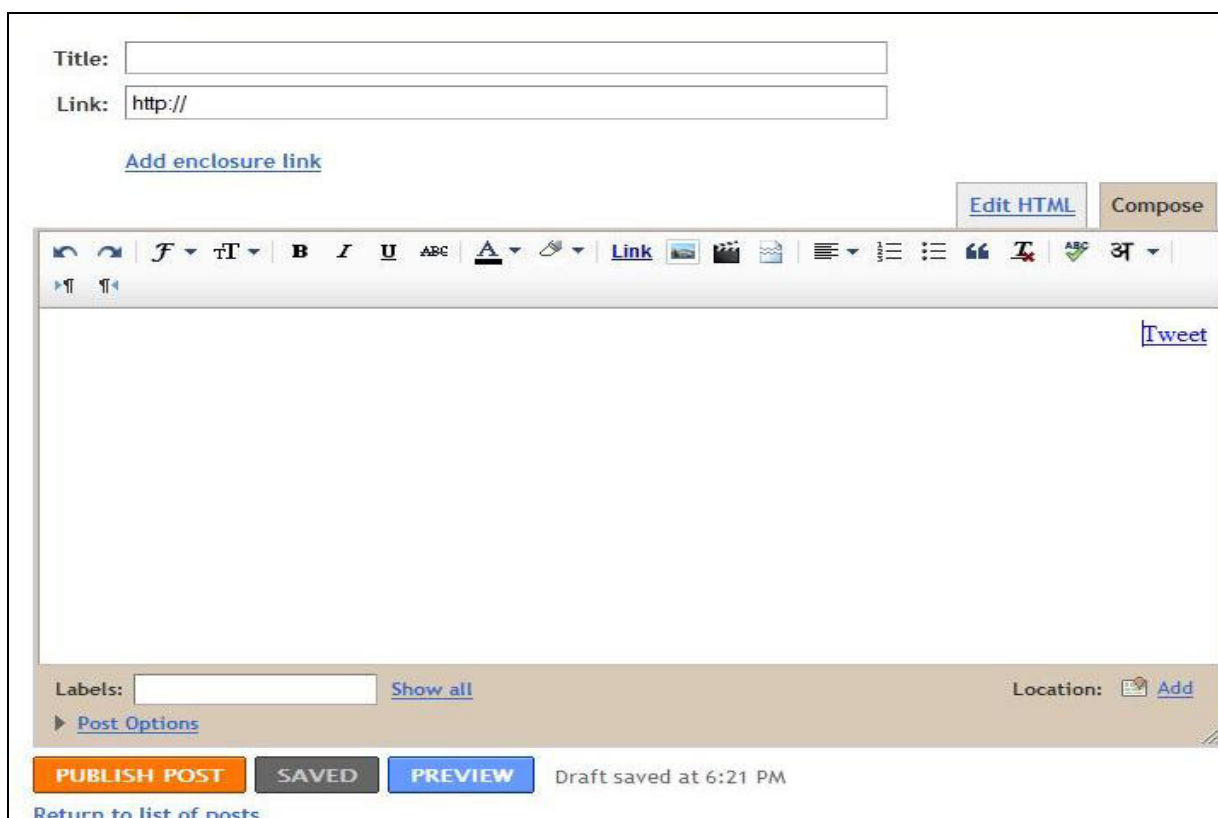
Figure 7.1 Text Editor of blogger

The text editors make it easy to format the posts and also facilitate inserting images, videos or HTML code to make the content presentable and interesting to the readers. Pictures, videos, ad banners or even audio files in the post make it interesting and also convey important information or messages to the readers in the best and most effective manner possible. The editor's view can be toggled between plain visual mode and HTML. If one has a knowledge of HTML, it can be used to fine tune aspects which otherwise cannot be handled in the visual mode.

Adding a catchy title for the post and writing an impressive post will definitely help in getting it noticed and attract traffic to the blog. However, while the title needs to be catchy it also should be simple and short.

The first few weeks are crucial in establishing presence and credentials in the online space. Therefore, it is essential for businesses to develop blog posts that define the business, its focus, and its expertise in the subject. It would also help if the posts are thoroughly researched and add value to the existing views on the subject.
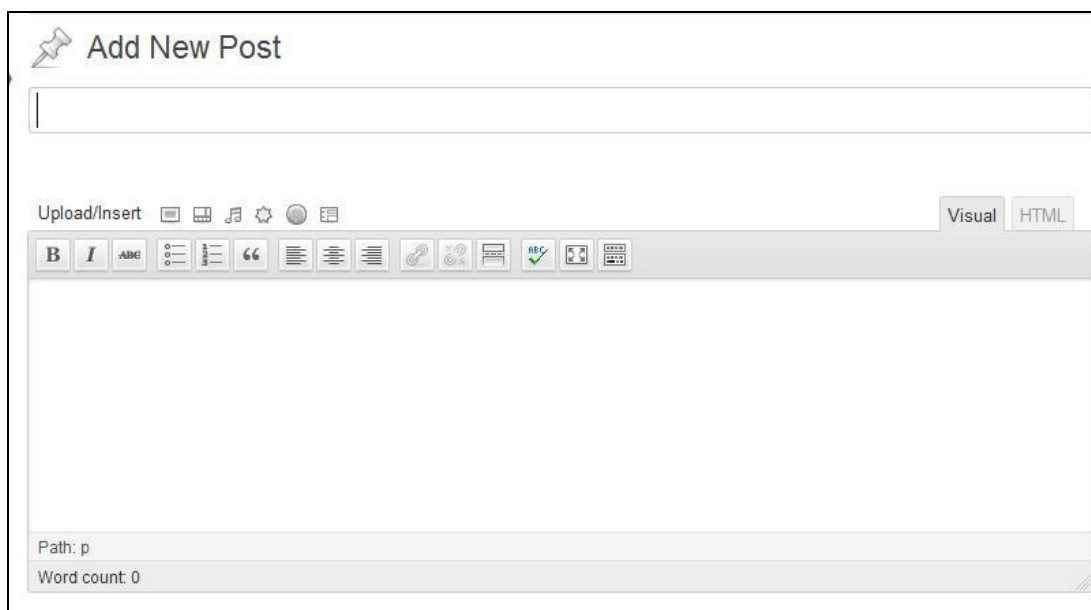

Figure 7.2 Text Editor of Wordpress

The best way to start a business blog would be to have a number of posts ready to ensure that you do not slip either on the *quality* of the posts or on the *posting frequency*. A deliberate preparation of a series of posts will also help in making your opinions consistent and also giving the business a distinct voice.

In order to generate interaction from the readers make sure that the first posts are conversational in nature so that they can be drawn into the conversation in the form of comments below the posts. Since most people hate the mechanical tone of the marketing campaigns, a conscious effort should be made to avoid the marketing jargon in the blog.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is important to get a page indexed and ranked higher in the search engines results pages (SERPs). Even if one is not using the blog for SEO it is still important to carry out keyword research and build the article around these keywords. Think of keywords as words or phrases that your prospective readers will use while searching for content online. However, keywords should be used with discretion and should appear naturally in the post, without affecting the readability.

If the post can have images, do include them. A picture not only speaks a thousand words but also makes the post attractive and colourful. Do not ignore specifying an alternate text for the image since it improves accessibility of the post. Images also help in being found online since the post will be indexed as having an image and likely to be displayed even if someone is using image search.

If the post contains content that might need further explanation do add links to relevant web pages in the post. These links can be either to your own posts, if you have covered the subject earlier, or to other web pages or articles that help to enhance the reader experience.
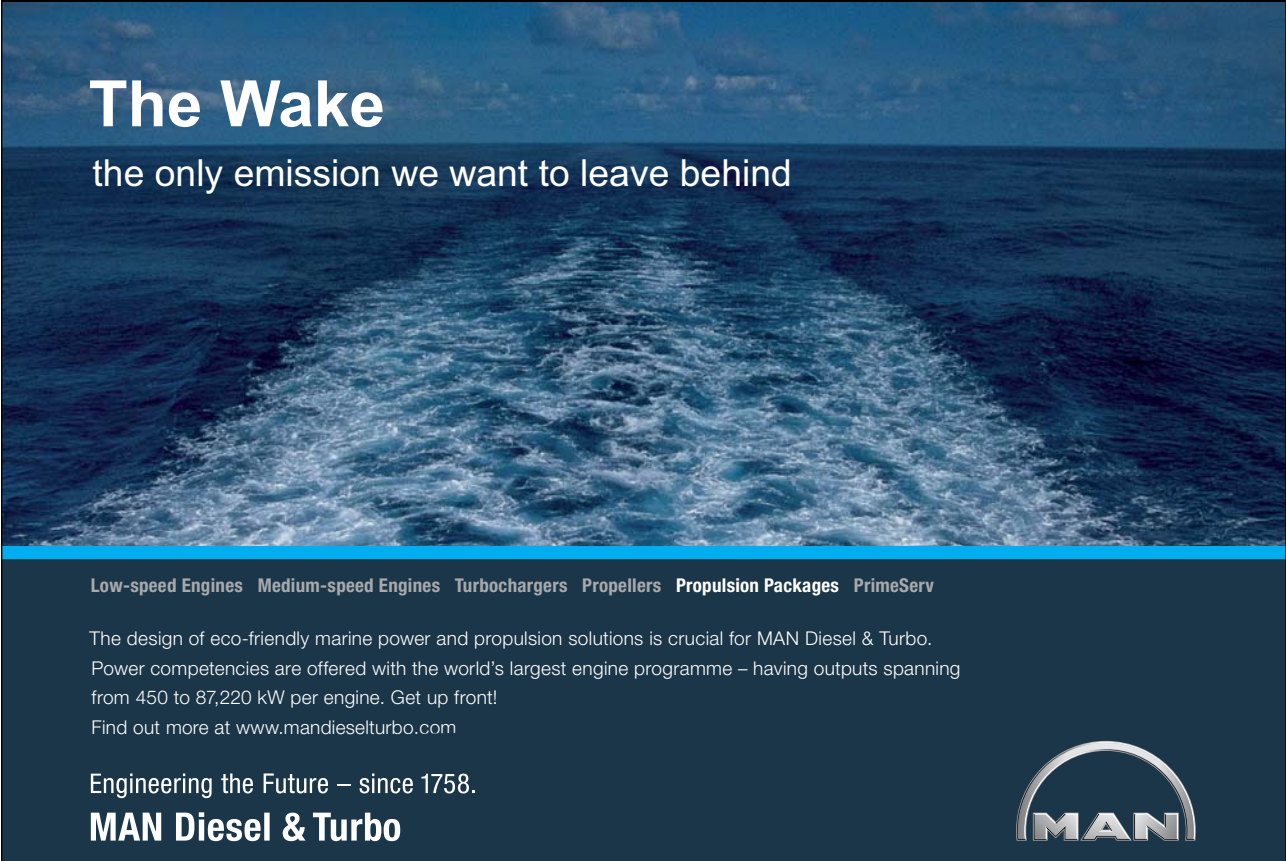
It is pertinent to mention here that while regularly posting content on the blog, one also needs to keep in touch with what is happening on the web. Tracking other blogs related to the subject of your blog and leaving comments on the posts there is a good way of initiating or joining conversations with others. Having conversations on the web automatically gets more readers or external links to your blog in addition to establishing your credibility as an expert.

Keeping in touch with the latest developments in the area of interest also helps to get new ideas for content for the blog. In addition one can follow blogs of experts in the field, subscribe to traditional news alerts, and use the social media to research potential blog topics.

7.1   Essentials of a Great Blog Post

Language: These days blogs can be written in any language but still the most popularly used language on the Internet worldwide remains English. Therefore, the emphasis here is not in terms of which language is used for writing the blog but rather in terms of the grammar, spelling and punctuation. Although an informal tone is used for writing blogs, one still needs to ensure the usage of correct grammar, spellings and punctuation so that the posts appear to have been written by a professional who knows what is being talked about. Let your professional voice come out in the post. While writing, it is best to be polite and avoid the usage of slang or swear words in the text.

Presentation: Since the body text is the soul of the blog post, the way it is presented is very important to attract readers and keep their attention. In order to make a good presentation the post should be readable and therefore using the right font style and size along with sufficient line spacing is essential. Also make sure that the sentences are not too long and the body of text is broken down into paragraphs to allow for easy reading and comprehension.

Sub Headings: If the post is sufficiently long, it is best to use sub-headings to make it look more organized and orderly. Sub-headings highlight the key points in the post, help to make the content more understandable and also make it easier for people to scan through the post to get a quick idea of what the post is all about.

Content: There is no doubt that *Content is King*. That's what gets the traffic and readers to the blog. So all efforts should be made to make the post as interesting and engaging as possible. Next, it's best to keep off any controversy, especially the political and moral kind. You wouldn't want to lose readership or customers because of reasons that have nothing to do with your product or service.

As with any composition, a blog post also needs an introduction, a body and a closing. The introduction is the face of the article and should immediately tell the reader what the post is about and catch their attention. The body of the post is where all the information is conveyed in detail, which may include lists, data, statistics, images, charts and anything else. After the body is complete, conclude with a short and crisp closing that summarizes the key points in the post.

Be Original: It is evident that everyone needs to read up and research a topic before posting content in the blog. But make sure that the posts are written in your own words, as plagiarism is strictly off-limits. So be original and avoid copying even a single line from some other document, and if you need to then it's always best to acknowledge it and attribute it to the original author. Search engines are now giving more weightage to pages with original content that is fresh and updated, giving them a higher ranking as against copied content which is penalised by search engines.

Similarly, photographs or illustrations are also copyrighted and therefore cannot be used freely unless it exists in the public domain. There are a few websites that offer copyright free photos that can be used anywhere in any manner, for example Wikimedia Commons.

8 Content Ideas For The Business Blog

In the last chapter we learned how to start a business blog. It's easy to say, "Start blogging". But what should one blog about in a business blog? Well, initially there is plenty of material to blog about, but as time passes by all your ideas may run dry making you wonder what to write about next.

For a blog, content is king. It is the content that will draw readers and traffic to the blog, so it becomes all the more important to make sure that you have interesting and compelling content in it to make the necessary impact as well as impart the information or messages to the audience so that they keep coming back for more.

Therefore, drawing out a content strategy right at the beginning will go a long way in maintaining the blog in the future. First and foremost, decide the frequency of postings and make it a standard procedure so that the readers know when to expect the next post. Regular and frequent postings helps to keep your readers interested and engaged, and it also helps in getting your blog indexed more frequently in the search engines. It is also important to decide what kind of information is permissible and what is off-limits.

Keeping abreast of the latest developments in your field and reading other blogs on the same subject will give you fresh ideas to blog about and a list can be prepared for a series of posts that can be covered in the future. In this way, ideas never run dry and a lot of spice and variety can be added to the blog posts.

Listed below are some ideas that can be selected and gainfully used to generate content as type of posts for the business blog.

Industry News: Customers today are much more informed and knowledgeable about global developments in any field thanks to the ever expanding reach of the Internet and the social media. It is no longer difficult to keep track of industrial news and developments. Therefore, writing about the latest developments in the industry or the business, in the blog, is the best way to let your customers know how it is going to affect them and that you are on top of the situation.

Product / Service Information: Blogs can be a great way to showcase a company's brand or products in a manner that doesn't look like a marketing campaign or being pushed. Thus, regularly updated information about the products and services can be provided in great detail on the blog thereby keeping the readers and customers interested in your brand and services/products. The blog can also help the customers to make the most of their products by providing additional resources like tutorials, how-to articles and FAQs.

Teaser Posts: The arrival of new products and services can be announced first on the blog, in the form of teasers, before they hit the market. A blog is the perfect place to let out small titbits of information that will go a long way in generating curiosity and a '*buzz*' around your yet-to-be released offer. Word-of-mouth or in this case social media interaction works wonders.

Success Stories: It is not uncommon for a business to get testimonials from customers. In some cases, your business might even be carrying out a consulting job to resolve your customer's needs. Get all such success stories out there because this conveys the message to your customers that you really are making a difference to people. These posts are a great way to develop a good reputation.

Educational Posts: Blog posts can be a great way to educate and impart knowledge, to the readers, about the technology and products in general. These are educational posts that help to empower the customers to be able to make informed choices about products or services and not specifically about your own products. For example, if your blog is about digital cameras, you can write a post about what to look for in a digital camera while deciding which one to buy. This will make the customers feel that they are in control and chances are that they will come to trust you since you gave them that knowledge in the first place.

Company News & Announcements: Any major news of company achievements, financial results, policy changes and or community initiatives can be conveyed via the blog to the readers from time to time. However, it needs to be emphasised here that these kinds of posts are *dated* and hence become irrelevant very fast. Therefore, it would make sense not to make such posts very often.
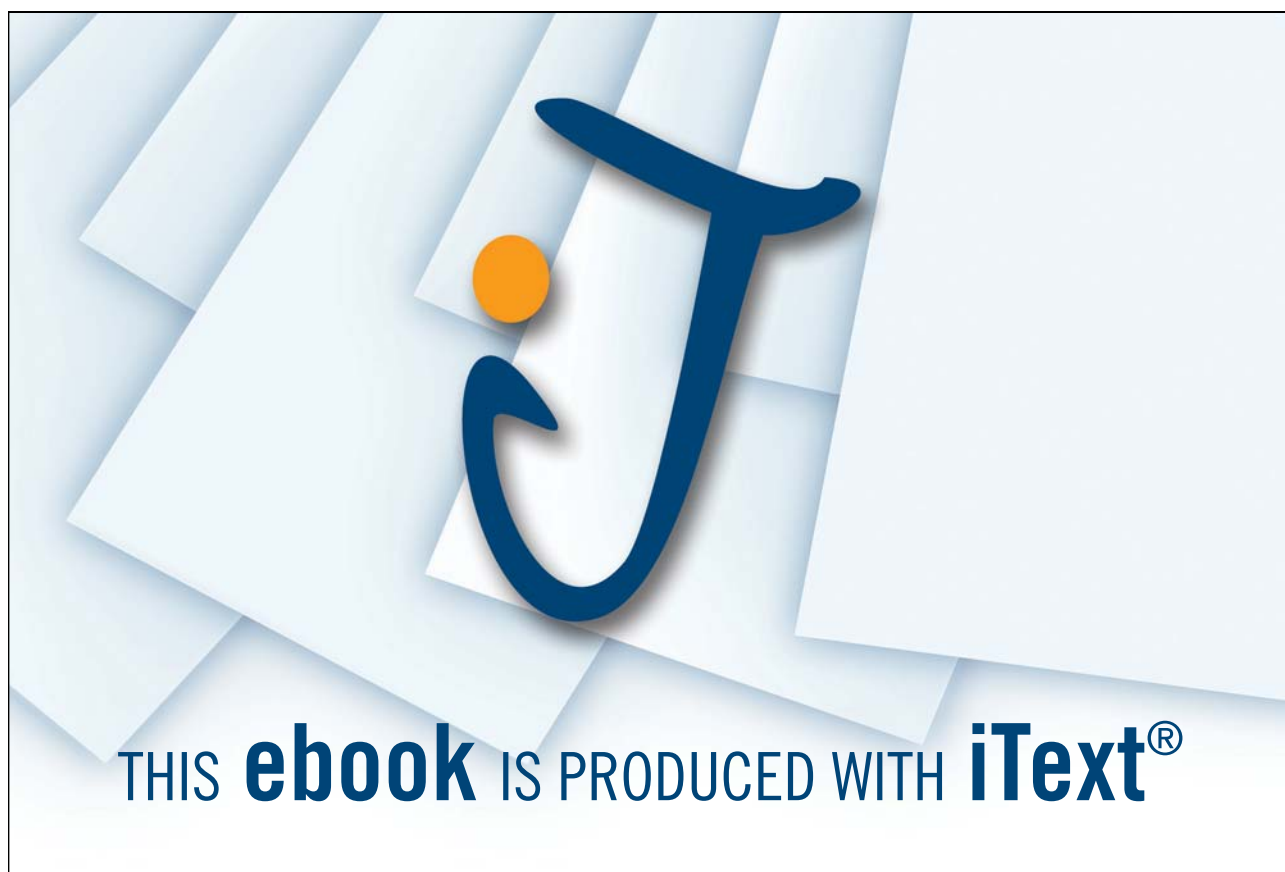
The "Behind the Scenes" Post: A "*behind the scenes*" post is one, which describes all the steps and processes that go into making the products right from the material selection, quality control, green norms being followed to all other advanced processes that are being used to get the end product to the customer. This is the best way to let your readers know about who you are, what you do and how you do it. By talking openly about your business processes in this manner, you are establishing trust in your customers, getting them closer to the brand and giving them a good reason to continue their loyalty.

The Growing Up Stories: Every business goes through a lot of ups and downs, challenges and feel good moments. It's about overcoming the odds and succeeding. It's about chasing a dream and a passion. There are big emotional and organizational upheavals on the way. What better way to document these, than to do it in your own blog? As luck would have it, people love the underdogs because that is someone they can relate to.

Related Content: It is not necessary for a business blog to stick to only the products/services that they deal in; it can also have content about related topics, to pull in the people on the fringes. For example, if you are making cat food, you can write about cats in general.

Feedback posts: These types of posts can initiate a debate about existing or forthcoming products or services. They can provide the various options available to improve or modify the product along with the pros and cons of the options and then request a feedback from the readers.

Case Studies / Research: Once in a while a business blog can also include information about case studies and research undertaken by the business to feed the brain cells of the readers who are technically inclined. This will also help attract other professionals from the related field.

Guest Posts: During the course of blogging you will come across many experts or enthusiasts who are writing about similar topics. If they are amenable to the idea, have them write a post for your blog. Most bloggers readily agree and are happy to oblige because it gives them added publicity and back links to their own blogs.

9 Rules/Guidelines for Business Blogs

Okay, now that we know what to write in the blog or how and where to get ideas for the content, we need to make sure that we do it right. Internet being what it is, there is little scope for covering up or hiding mistakes. Therefore, the best recourse is to accept mistakes. But why commit them in the first place? Why would you want to rubbish your reputation and months/years of hard work because of something avoidable or maybe an error of judgement? Thus, to safeguard the reputation and credibility of a blogger and hence the business, given below are certain "*rules and guidelines*" that should be followed while posting content on the blog.

Blogger's Personality Should Compliment the Business: While the blogger can have independence over the content and style of writing posts for the business blog, a conscious effort should be made to merge the blogger's personality with the brand image. The business/company/corporate image, brand values and reputation should be preserved in the blog posts at all times. Therefore, the blogger's tone should reflect the company's position in the industry. For example, if the company were a leader in the industry you wouldn't want statements that are confusing or non-committal and which lack confidence.

Stick to the Objectives: The blogger should stick to the original objectives of the blog and the laid out scope. Try not to make the blog about self-expression or to make it larger than the business. It is okay once in a while to deviate from the core objectives of the business as long as it does not become a practice.

Don't Attack the Competition: Don't attack the competition as it opens your own business to counterattacks. It also reflects you as not being confident about your products or service and the negativity will hurt your own brand and hence the business. This does not mean that you do not try to position your products or service as superior, just that you need to do it more subtly by highlighting the benefits that your business offers to the customers.

Avoid Prolonged Conversations on Individual Issues: The blog should aim towards starting a broad based conversation that is meaningful to a large number of the readers. However, at some point in time you will come across a reader, maybe an existing customer, raising his personal issue or problem with your product or service. Though you might want to address the issue for the benefit of being seen as customer friendly, do not continue the conversation on your blog. Tell the reader politely to email you the details and then ensure that someone from customer service gets in touch with the reader. You really don't want to let your blog become a customer service desk. Rest assured, it will, if you encourage discussions on individual issues.

Respect Privacy of Your Readers and Customers: There will be occasions when you might want to post interesting stories about your products and how they changed someone's life. In all such cases, make sure that you have the customer's permission to reproduce the story or to use their names with the story. The same rule applies to quoting your readers in your blog posts.

Avoid Marketing Your Products: How many times have you sat through an entire commercial break on TV without getting fidgety or changing the channel? Everyone gets irritated with the marketing hype or jargon whether it is in print, TV or online. Avoid trying to sell products or service on the blog, instead try to educate your readers. Think of the concerns your audience might have and address those in your blog. If you do a good job of that, selling will be taken care of. Make your blog a good mix of opinions, news, and product information and avoid too many press releases, product launches, and events.

Cross Link Your Other Posts: If you are referring to something that you have already covered in some other post of yours, make it a point to provide a link to the other post in the present post. This way you do not have to write the same thing again and if your reader wants more details he can find it within your blog rather that go look for it somewhere else.

Update Your Older Blogs: With passage of time old posts are pushed out of the front page. That does not mean that no one will read them. Remember that people find the posts through search engines. So it is worth your while to keep taking stock of the older posts and update them when required or necessary.

Respond: It is considered bad manners if you do not respond to someone who has commented on your post. You need to and should continue the discussion, if you can, or at least thank the reader for his time and effort. Keep in mind that anyone who is reading your blog is a potential customer and needs to be engaged and eased into the sales process.

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Take Ownership: The blogger or the team needs to take ownership of the blog, and not only in terms of the content. The blogger should constantly make efforts to enhance his knowledge and expertise in maintaining a blog and promoting it.

Do not Become A News Portal or a Link Directory: In the endeavour to post '*something*,' do not take recourse to putting news items without giving your opinion or thoughts on the topic. Similarly, do not create posts, which are predominantly a collection of links to other web pages. Remember, people are coming to your blog to read what you have to say about a topic and because of your expertise. Do not disappoint them.

Assert, Assert, Assert: Every blog post and every response to a comment is an opportunity for you to assert why you are an expert in your field, what differentiates your business from the competition and how your business can better benefit your readers.

Write for Your Audience and Not Search Engines: In a bid to optimise your post for search, do not spoil the reading experience of the visitor to your blog. Remember that search engines can only get traffic to your blog they can't place orders. Loyalty is more important than number of visitors. A long time association with a visitor to your blog is possible only if your content is good and interesting to read.

Call for Action: Not necessary with every post but something you need to do once in a while to get the visitors to take some action. It could be a free newsletter, a free trial, samples etc. or the option to learn more about your products at the company website or maybe even the visit of a business representative.

The Legal Angle: Have a disclaimer and limitation of liability clause posted somewhere on your blog. Although it should not happen in the normal course of responsible blogging, there is still a remote possibility of someone getting hurt, misled or harmed in some manner.

10 Google's Insight Into Good Content

All search engines are updated regularly in a bid to improve their performance and following these updates or pre-empting their effect on ranking is a futile exercise. Google updated their search algorithm, called the **Panda Update,** in the beginning of this year 2011. It was designed to remove or relegate the low quality content from the search results. As a result of this update a lot of websites were seriously affected, which caused a general panic all around with people wondering what they could do to retain their rankings in the search results.

It sure would be foolhardy on Google's part to give details about how they were ranking pages, but in May 2011, in one of their blogs, they did address the issue and advised people not to get fixated with what the search engines do and instead focus on delivering the best user experience. In the same post they listed a set of questions, which gave a little insight into how Google looks at content, in order to rank it. The questions reiterate what we have discussed in the earlier chapters and one should always keep these in mind while creating posts or designing your blog.

Some of these questions specifically mention websites, but they do apply to blogs as well. The questions listed below are sourced *verbatim* from the official Google Website *http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com*

- Would you trust the information presented in this article?
- Is this article written by an expert or enthusiast who knows the topic well, or is it more shallow in nature?
- Does the site have duplicate, overlapping, or redundant articles on the same or similar topics with slightly different keyword variations?
- Would you be comfortable giving your credit card information to this site?
- Does this article have spelling, stylistic, or factual errors?
- Are the topics driven by genuine interests of readers of the site, or does the site generate content by attempting to guess what might rank well in search engines?
- Does the article provide original content or information, original reporting, original research, or original analysis?
- Does the page provide substantial value when compared to other pages in search results?
- How much quality control is done on content?
- Does the article describe both sides of a story?
- Is the site a recognized authority on its topic?
- Is the content mass-produced by or outsourced to a large number of creators, or spread across a large network of sites, so that individual pages or sites don't get as much attention or care?
- Was the article edited well, or does it appear sloppy or hastily produced?
- For a health related query, would you trust information from this site?
- Would you recognize this site as an authoritative source when mentioned by name?
- Does this article provide a complete or comprehensive description of the topic?
- Does this article contain insightful analysis or interesting information that is beyond obvious?
- Is this the sort of page you'd want to bookmark, share with a friend, or recommend?
- Does this article have an excessive amount of ads that distract from or interfere with the main content?

- Would you expect to see this article in a printed magazine, encyclopaedia or book?
- Are the articles short, unsubstantial, or otherwise lacking in helpful specifics?
- Are the pages produced with great care and attention to detail vs. less attention to detail?
- Would users complain when they see pages from this site?

11 How To Enhance Your Blog

Once the basic design and layout of the blog is created and published, it can be enhanced much more with the addition of certain free useful resources, tools and gadgets to make the blog more helpful, engaging and user-friendly. These elements, gadgets or plug-ins are either provided by the blogging host itself or can be easily found on the Internet for free integration into the blog by inserting the HTML/JavaScript code provided. The gadgets or resources that should be included within the blog will depend upon its purpose and if it can help attract more readers.

The gadgets, tools or resources are of many types and can help in sharing/distributing content, displaying useful lists/links, get RSS feeds, provide you tube videos related to the content of the blog, search feature, slideshow of images or pictures and social networking in the form of friend connect or by integrating other popular networking platforms like Facebook or Twitter into it among many other uses. In fact, there are so many useful resources that all of them cannot be covered in this chapter or book. Therefore, we shall introduce only the more important elements/gadgets that will help to enhance a business blog.

Add a Search Box: Adding a search box to the blog enables the visitors to search within the blog for more content by using relevant keywords. For example, if a visitor lands on the blog via a search engine while searching for hiking equipment, he might also want to see if the blog has content on camping equipment as well. Since it would take a lot of time and effort to manually search through the whole blog, a search box helps to make the task easier and also enables searching for relevant posts from within the page he is on.

Highlight Blog Content: Every blog has a built-in archiving function that shows a chronological display of all the posts that have been written. However there are certain gadgets/plug-ins available that can be used to highlight your most *Recent Posts*, *Related posts, Most Popular Posts* or a *Tag Cloud* that depicts the most popular keywords on the blog. Such widgets elicit the user's interest and encourage them to stay on the blog for a longer duration.

Bookmarking Buttons: Bookmarking buttons like "*AddThis*" or "*Share*" are a content sharing and social insights platforms that help users to share content/pages and thus drive in more traffic to your blog or website. The *AddThis* bookmarking button contains links to more than two hundred social networking and bookmarking websites. Installing this button on the blog allows the readers to easily share posts with their contacts on other networks, which in turn will get more traffic and exposure to the blog.

Twitter & Facebook Updates: Twitter and Facebook users can make use of the box widgets to display their latest status updates on the blog in real-time. The widget also allows visitors to start following you on Twitter or become your friend/like your business page on Facebook. This is a great way to broadcast your updates and also to gather more fans/followers and readers instantly.

Subscribe via Email or RSS Feed: A provision can be made on the blog for visitors to *Subscribe to* the RSS feed or to follow the blog via email. In both the cases, when a new blog post is created, the subscribers are notified of the latest post either through the feed or via email.

Blog Stats: It may not be a good idea in the beginning, but as the readership of the blog grows you might want to display the traffic information on your blog, which will help assert the fact that the blog has a good following. Similarly, a list of followers of your blog can also be displayed.

Blogroll: A Blogroll is a list of links to other blogs that you are following. For a business blog, it is best that the blogs you list here are relevant, good and bring value to your readers. Linking to other blogs implies that you are recommending those blogs to the readers. Therefore, be careful in choosing the blogs that you link to in the blogroll.

Newsreel & Video bar: The latest news or videos relevant to the subject of the blog can be displayed in the sidebar. In order to do this, one can specify relevant keywords for the news or videos so that the gadget or widget displays related content.

Polling/Survey: There are widgets available that help to create and embed a poll on your blog. Polling is a good way of engaging your readers and getting their feedback on a variety of issues that might be related to your existing products or with development of new ones. Many customers want to be involved in co-creation and would gladly fill out the forms.

12 How To Promote Your Business Blog

The word "marketing" or "promotion" always conjures up images of huge ad campaigns that are very expensive and exhaustive. In the physical bricks and mortar world, that is what is required involving use of celebrities in the ads, coverage in print and electronic media, press conferences and so on. But, the good news is that unlike the marketing of products, promoting a blog on the Internet can be all done for free.

In the earlier chapters we discussed how to create a business blog and how to go about posting content. A blog needs readers to deliver the benefits it has the potential for. Left alone, the blog will find its readers sooner or later. However, there are thousands of blogs that are cropping up online on a daily basis and a blog could do with a little help to get noticed or be visible to the targeted audience. The answer to this lies in *promotion*.

There are various ways and means to promote a blog and make the process faster. The best way to go about popularising a blog is by using free resources already available on the Internet to spread the word thereby getting a larger section of people to be aware of the business blog.

Promotion of a blog and its content can be achieved by various means and different things work for different people. Therefore, it is a hit and trial process and there is no single strategy, which can ensure success for the blog. But the concepts behind the promotion techniques are tried and tested and that is what we will discuss rather than recommending specific websites or processes.

Word-of-Mouth: After creating and posting content on a blog, probably the best and the most effective way to get people to read what you have written is by word-of-mouth. Spread the word about your blog to your near and dear ones, your friends, colleagues, neighbours and people in your community. This is the fastest way to get immediate traffic to your blog. You can then ask them to also pass the link to their friends and family and so on. The link can also be sent via e-mails, personal or official, which is a great way to advertise your blog.

Social Networking Sites: Today, it's become easier to spread the word online too with the help of various *social networking sites* that are available and are perceived as word-of-mouth on steroids. All one needs to do is to share the link with friends/ followers and if the content is interesting enough, they will share it within their network too.

Facebook, Twitter and now **Google Plus** (See Figures 12.1, 12.2 and 12.3 respectively) are great networking platforms to share content online and spread the word. However, the selection of one or more networks for promotion of the blog or the business will depend upon the nature of the business, the popularity of the service in the region and the features that the service offers. Each social networking site has something unique to offer. For example, Facebook allows businesses to create Pages, Twitter is a micro-blogging service that restricts the tweet to only 140 characters and Google+ allows one to create circles of users based on the level of interaction with other users.

Figure 12.1 Facebook.com – Social Networking Site

Figure 12.2 Twitter.com – Micro-blogging Service
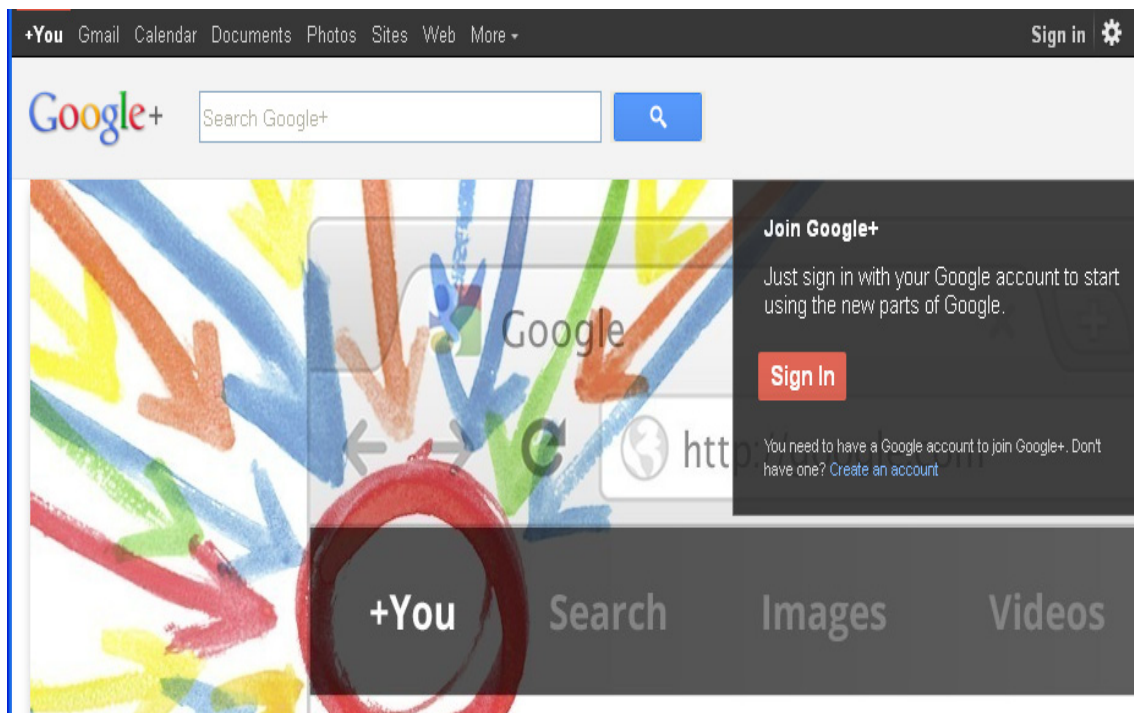
Figure 12.3 Google Plus – Social Networking Site

Integration of the blog feed with your profile on the site is another helpful feature that some of the social networking sites allow. Whenever a post is published on the blog, the networking sites get the feed and update the status of the user automatically, thereby allowing the user to network across various platforms, from one place.

Submit to Search Engines: Most people search for content on the web via various search engines, *Google Search* being the most popularly used. Search engines drive a major chunk of the total traffic a website or blog gets. Therefore it is important that a blog gets indexed as soon as possible. Almost all search engines do a good job of finding pages on the web and given enough time all blogs will eventually be found and listed in their results. However to make things easier, all search engines still have a provision that allows users to submit their blog URL for faster indexing. Though it is not guaranteed that a blog thus submitted will be listed immediately it would certainly help the blog to get listed faster.

Bookmarking Sites: Social bookmarking allows users to share, organize, search and manage their bookmarks, which really are references to Internet pages. Bookmarks contain the link to a webpage that one may be interested in along with a brief summary and tags, which indicate what the page is about. The social bookmarking sites are also indexed by search engines and used by many people to find fresh, popular and relevant content. Therefore it is useful to bookmark all blog posts after they are published. The bookmarks can be made public so that they are visible to the other users. One of the most popular bookmarking sites is *Digg*. See Figure 12.4.

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Figure 12.4 Popular Bookmarking Site - Digg.com

The "*Add This*" or "*Share*" button can be incorporated in the blog to make it easier for your readers to share the content without leaving your blog. The *AddThis* button allows readers to choose from a long list of bookmarking sites and to bookmark content easily from the browser. Examples of some popular bookmarking sites are **Digg, Reddit, Delicious,** and **Stumble Upon**. Registration to these sites is free and easily done. Submitting links to these sites helps in increasing the visibility of your blog on the web. See Figure 12.5.
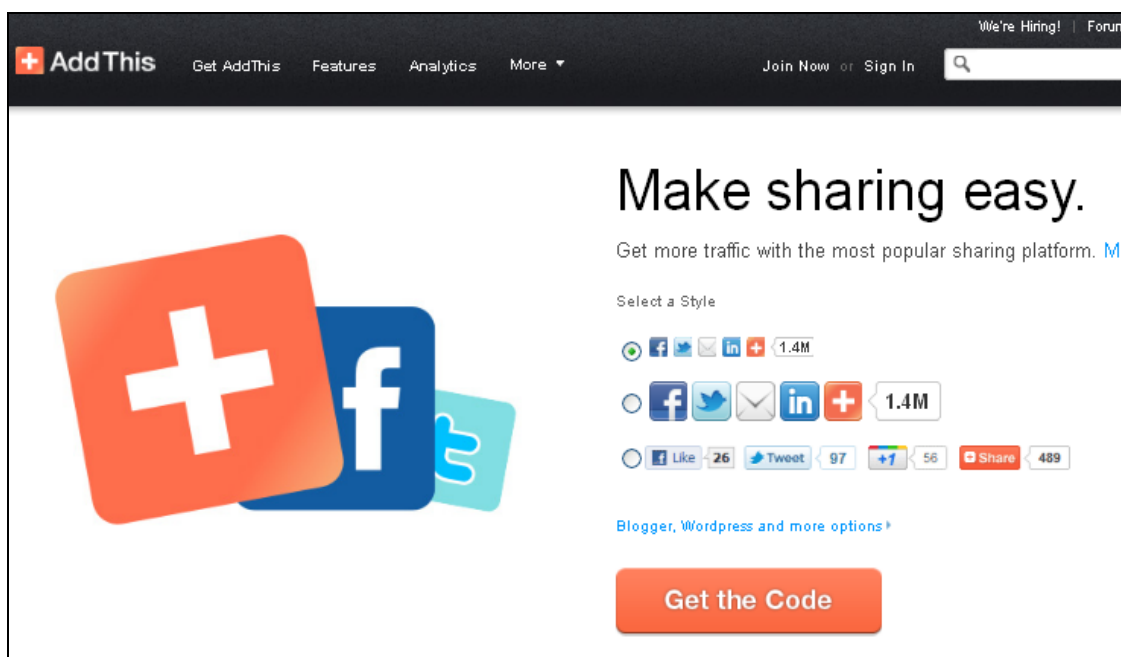
Figure 12.5 Bookmarking and Sharing Service – AddThis.com

Blog Directories: Apart from submitting links to the bookmarking sites, one also has the option of submitting the blog link to the popular *Blog Directories*, like **Technorati** (See Figure 12.6). There are many more blog directories to choose from, which are like *yellow pages* for blogs. They maintain a list of blogs from around the world, organised by categories and also rank them based on various factors like popularity, frequency of updates etc. Most of these are human edited and hence are considered more trustworthy than search engines.
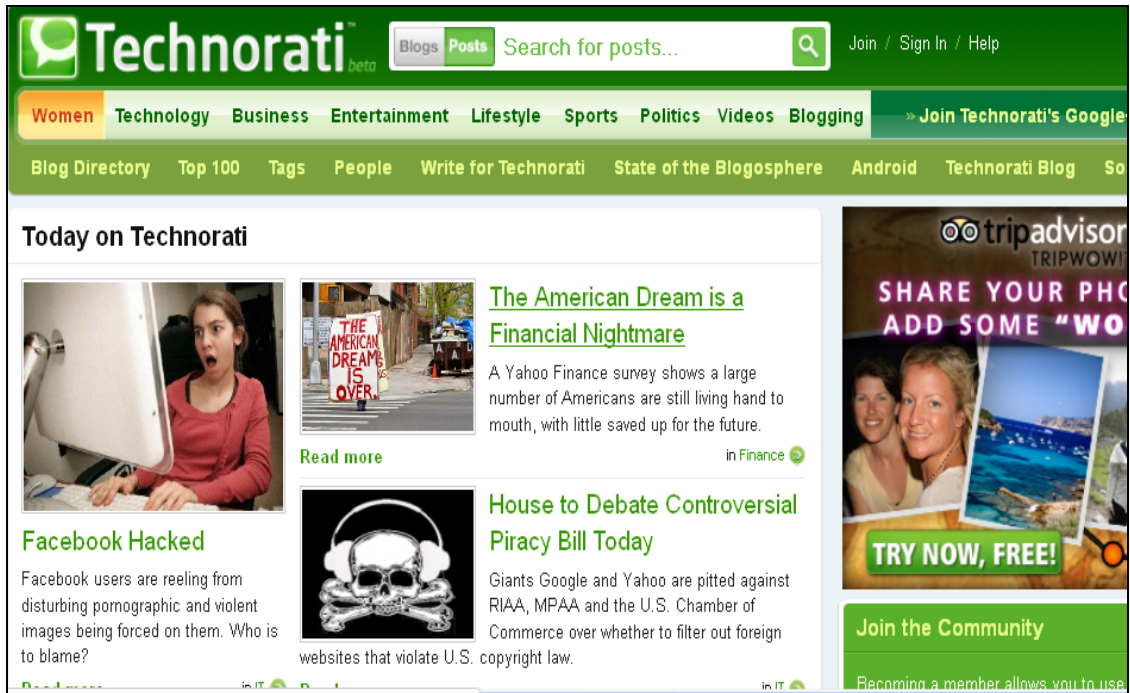
Figure 12.6 Technorati.com – Popular Blog Directory

People who are looking for blogs in the niche categories, often use these directories and hence it is worth its while to have the blog listed in some good reputed directories. Directories also help the content to be found faster since they are being indexed by the search engines at a much higher frequency than what a blog would be, at least in the beginning. Therefore the new blog posts will also be automatically listed much faster.

Feed Directories: Similar to the blog directories, there are many *Feed Directories*, which maintain a databank of the feeds available for subscription. These are organised into various categories. The data thus stored is searchable and can be used to subscribe to a website or blog's content without having to find and visit the websites/blogs. One can find the popular feed directories by doing an Internet search and the blog feed can be submitted to the directories for listing. **FeedAge. com** is one such popular RSS feed directory. See Figure 12.7.
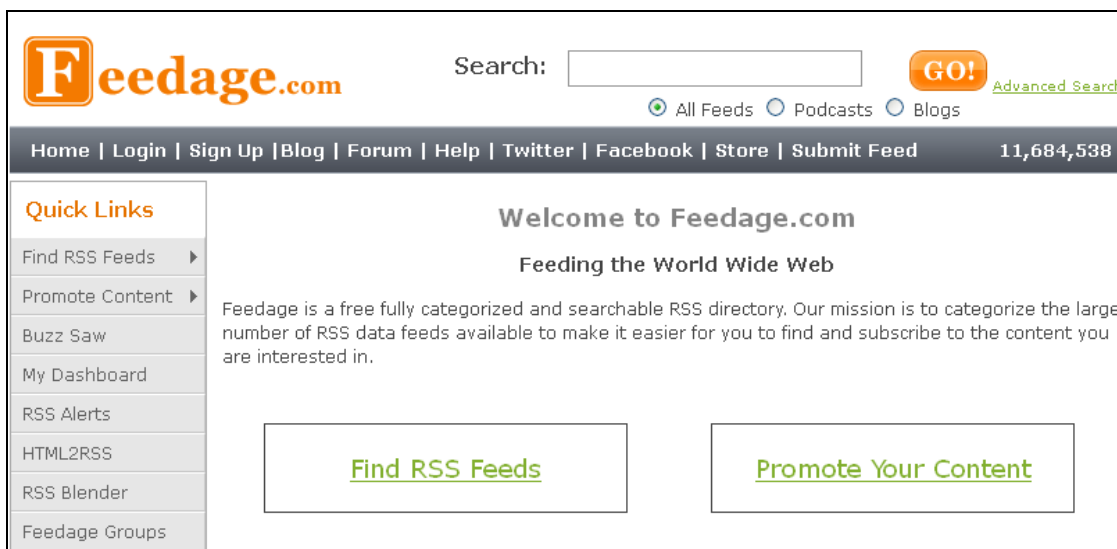
Figure 12.7 RSS Feed Directory - FeedAge.com

Through Referrals: If your blog contains good, compelling content, other bloggers writing on relevant subjects will link to your content on their own blogs and share it with their users. Having your blog linked on other blogs is also great for the SEO of your blog.

Join online communities/forums: Online communities/forums exist for almost every subject under the sun. As a blogger one should endeavour to become a member of the relevant forums and contribute to the discussions. This is a fantastic platform to introduce the blogger as an authority on the subject. If the blogger can significantly contribute to the forum and establish his expertise, other members of the forum will automatically be interested in following the blog.

It is easy to find various business communities/forums related to the topic of your interest online. **LinkedIn** is a popular networking site for professionals where one can join different communities or take part in various discussions that are related to the topic of interest. See Figure 12.8. Similarly, **CNET Forums** is a small business forum and discussion site where one can create new discussions or take part in existing ones. See Figure 12.9. (http://forums.cnet.com/small-business-forum/)
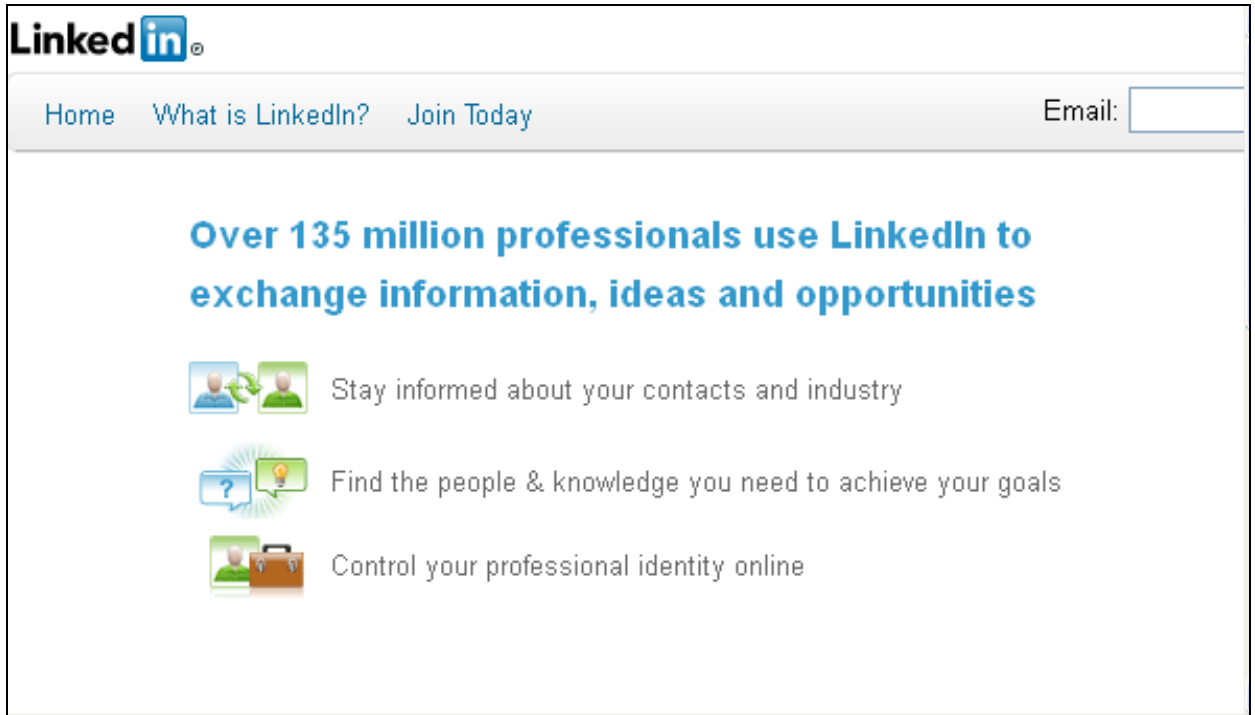
Figure 12. 8 Popular Site For Professionals To Network & Join Communities - LinkedIn.com

Figure 12.9 Small Business Forum and Discussion Site – CNET Forums

Comment on relevant blogs: While browsing the net for information or research, a blogger will come across many other interesting blogs and articles. The opportunity should be used to leave an appropriate comment on the post. It is also advisable to include a signature or feed of your blog in the comment, thereby increasing the blog's visibility. But if you have nothing to say, don't do it as irrelevant comments made just for the purpose of advertising are considered spam.

Offline Promotion: While online promotion techniques will help to make the blog visible on the Internet, the offline means of promotion should not be overlooked. The URL of the business blog can be included on business cards, company stationary, letterheads etc. Opportunities like industry events should be used to tell the audience and customers about the blog and how it can be useful to them.

13 Monitor Blog Performance

A blog as a business tool will take some time to start showing its impact on the performance of the business. But you cannot afford to wait, say a year or two, just to find out that the blog did not make any difference or that you ought to have done something differently. So, while you are putting in effort and time to maintain a blog for your business you need to constantly monitor it for performance. This will not only help you to see how effective the blog is in making a difference to your business but also in tweaking it to get the best results.

There are some metrics that you can use to monitor the performance of your blog. These metrics will be a good indicator of the performance of the blog with respect to the original objectives of starting the blog.

Visitors/Unique Visitors: Monitoring the number of visitors each month will help you understand the growth in the popularity of your blog. There are many tools like *Google Analytics* and *Hit counters* to give you the details. Remember there is a difference between visitors and unique visitors. The trend in both gives different information. A growth in number of unique visitors will tell you the actual new visitors to your blog through search engines or referrals whereas the trend about the visitors will be an indicator of returning users. The returning users are the ones who like your blog and hence more likely to engage with you on the blog or perhaps even get converted.

Time on Site: This is a good indicator of the quality and the retaining power of the blog. The more time a visitor is spending on your blog, the more successful you have been to generate and retain his interest in the blog. A higher time on site indicates that visitors are actually reading the posts and also visiting other posts on your blog.

RSS Subscriptions: The number of subscriptions indicates the number of offline readers of the blog. The tools measuring the number of visitors do not record these readers. Generally one can use ratio of the *new RSS subscribers* in a month to the monthly visitors as a conversion.

Comments: Comments imply the user engagement capacity of your blog. The more comments you can draw from your audience the more it means that you are succeeding in starting and maintaining a two-way communication with your audience. However, you need to discount any spam in the comments and even delete them at the earliest.

Conversions: Converting a reader into a lead is what most business blogs aim at and it is a good practise to keep track of how well the blog is performing with regard to this aspect. Again, certain free tools can assist you in monitoring this and even if there are no products being sold on the website you can monitor aspects like how many people chose to visit your website from your blog, how many people opted for a newsletter or a free sample or even agreed to a telephonic/ personal marketing call.

Inbound Links: The number of inbound links i.e. external web pages linking to your blog will give you a direct indication of your reputation and the quality of your content. People will link to your blog only if they feel that it can provide value to their own readers. It also implies your position as an expert in the subject.

There is a lot more information one can get about the blog performance by using either the inbuilt statistics feature in the blog service or by employing a third party tool. As mentioned above, a good tool is *Google Analytics*, which in addition to the above information also provides details like geographical location of visitors, keywords used to reach blog, referring sites, browsers used, bounce rate etc. All this information can be used to tweak the blog and your strategy to achieve the desired business objectives.

14 Free Handy Tools

Once the business blog is up and running, one can choose to use some handy tools and resources that are available on the Internet to help track and analyse the statistics related to the blog, enhance the blog and also help, albeit indirectly, to get more traffic to the blog. There are many such user-friendly tools that can be found on the Internet and the good part is that most of these tools are free. This chapter deals with some of the handy tools that are available on the Internet that can help in many ways in maintenance and management of the blog.

14.1 Domain Name for Blog

Domain Forwarding – If you are using a free blog hosting service then the default URL (address) assigned to the blog is a sub domain of the primary domain belonging to the service provider. So the URL of a blog hosted on free services will look like **xyz.abc.com**, where **xyz** is the name chosen for the blog and **abc** is the domain name of the hosting website. For example, a blog created on blogger will have a URL *http://yourname.blogspot.com*. There is nothing wrong with this other than the fact that the primary domain does not belong to the business owner and there might be issues with the identity and branding of the business.

It is a common misconception that a blog needs to be self-hosted for it to reflect the company owned domain. One can actually buy / register only a custom domain name and then use the "**domain forwarding facility**" offered by the domain name sellers to point it towards the blog. This ensures that anyone typing the custom domain name in the address bar is forwarded to the page to which the domain has been forwarded, in this case, the blog. The custom domain name being used thus becomes the primary identity of the blog and it is also reflected in the address bar and also in the search results.

If a website, and hence a domain, is already available for the business, then a sub-domain can be pointed to the blog i.e. *blog.yourname.com*

Domain Name Availability – Before one goes around shopping for a domain name, one needs to find out what the domain name should be and whether it is available. The domain name has to be unique and it is indeed a time consuming job to find a domain name that one is happy with and which is also available. All domain name sellers registered with ICANN (International Corporation of Assigned Names & Numbers) offer the facility to check for domain name availability. The list of registered vendors is available on the ICANN website, *http://www.icann.org/*.

It may so happen that the preferred domain name is already taken but not being used. There is no way to have the owner give up the ownership, but one can still try to buy off the domain. There are free web services, commonly called "*whois*" that can be used for finding out details like owners and their contact details.

14.2 Google Webmaster Tools

Google Webmaster tools (Figure 14.1) help the blog owners analyse their blog vis-à-vis how the search engine sees and interact with their blog. The *Webmaster* tools can be used to identify any issues regarding accessibility of pages, issues with title and Meta tags, links etc. Webmaster tools are free to use and can be accessed with a Google ID. However, ownership of the blog needs to be verified before the service can be used, which is a simple process requiring insertion of a small piece of code into the blog. If the blog is created on **Google Blogger** then the process is even simpler wherein the Webmaster tools can be enabled from the blog dashboard itself.
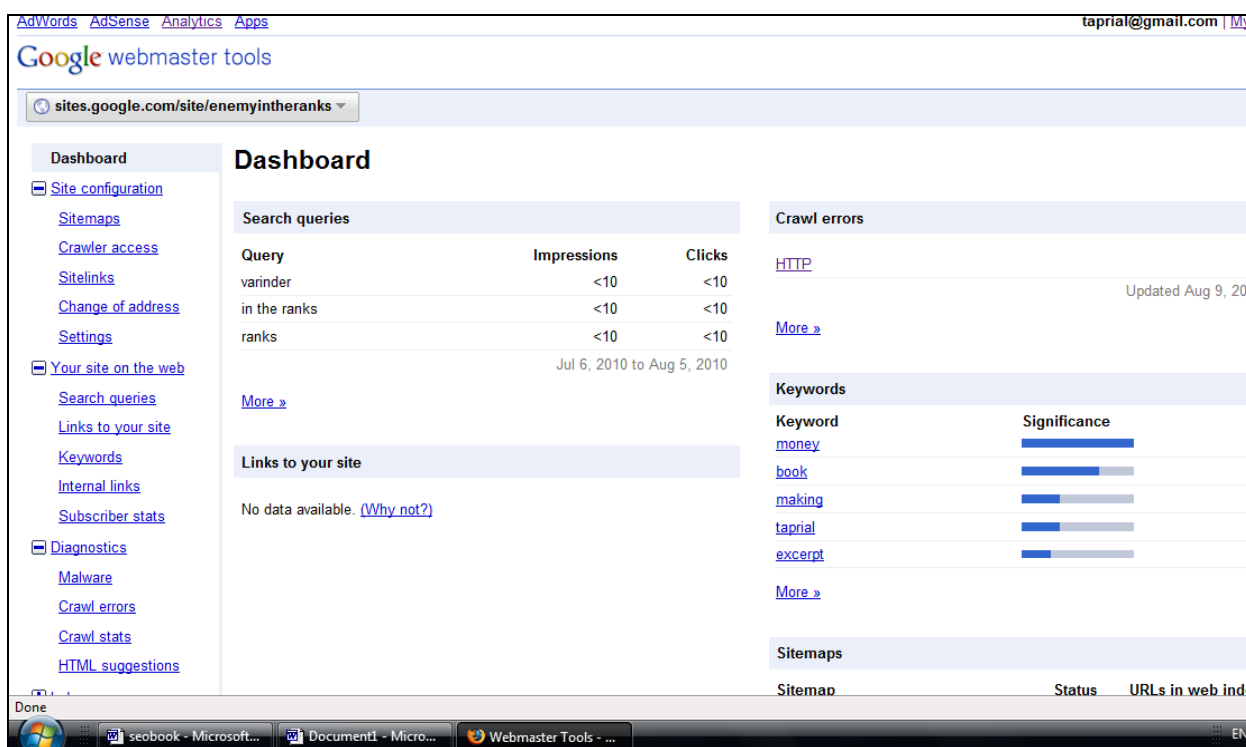
Figure 14.1 Google Webmaster Tools Dashboard

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14.3 Google Analytics

Google analytics provides details and an insight about the traffic to blogs and websites. This tool analyses details like *how many visitors came to the blog, from where, what pages they landed on*, the *type of browser* they were using, the *most effective*, the *least effective pages* on the blog and a lot of other relevant information. The information available is very useful and allows one to not only monitor the activity on the blog but also to improve its performance. The Google Analytics program is particularly helpful to business websites because it allows them to set up goals with which they can track conversions.

One can use an existing Google Account to log in to the Google analytics website. A tracking code needs to be installed in the blog template, so that all the pages of the blog can be tracked. Figure 14.2 shows what a standard dashboard looks like. Figure 14.3 is an image of the website tracking results page.
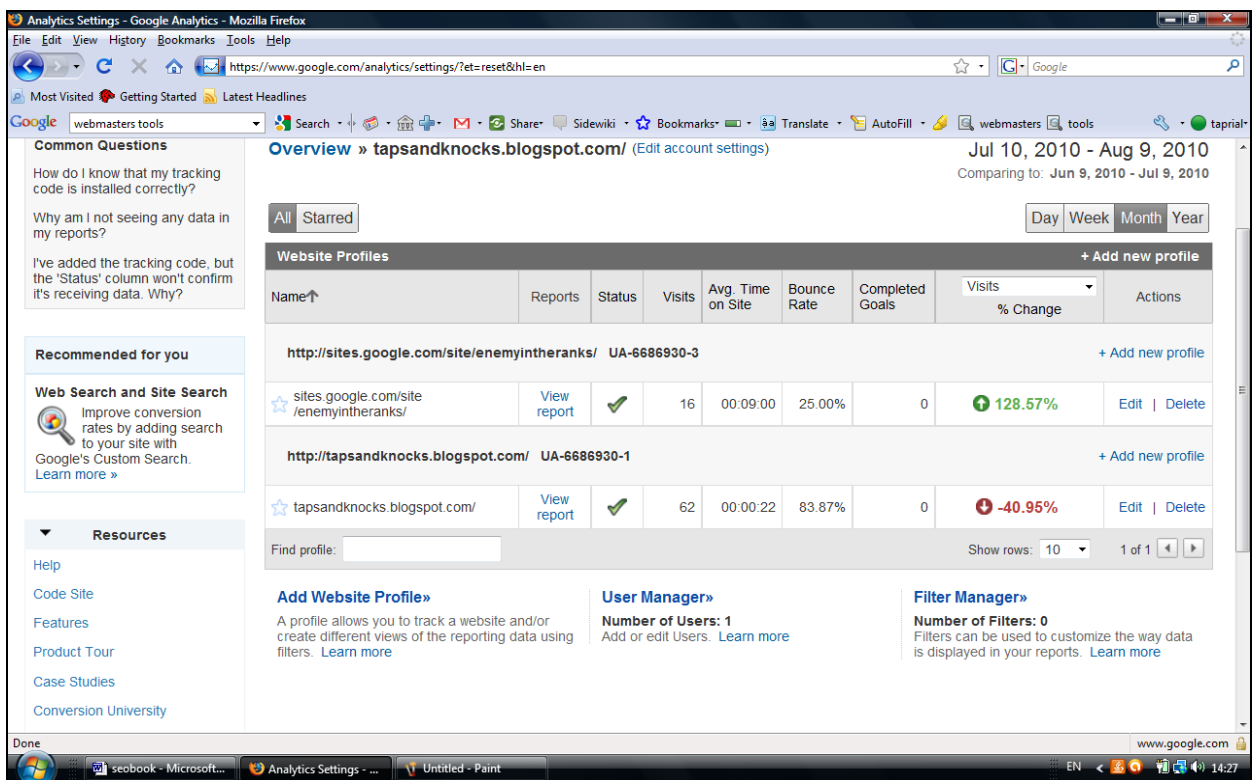
Figure 14.2 Google Analytics Dashboard
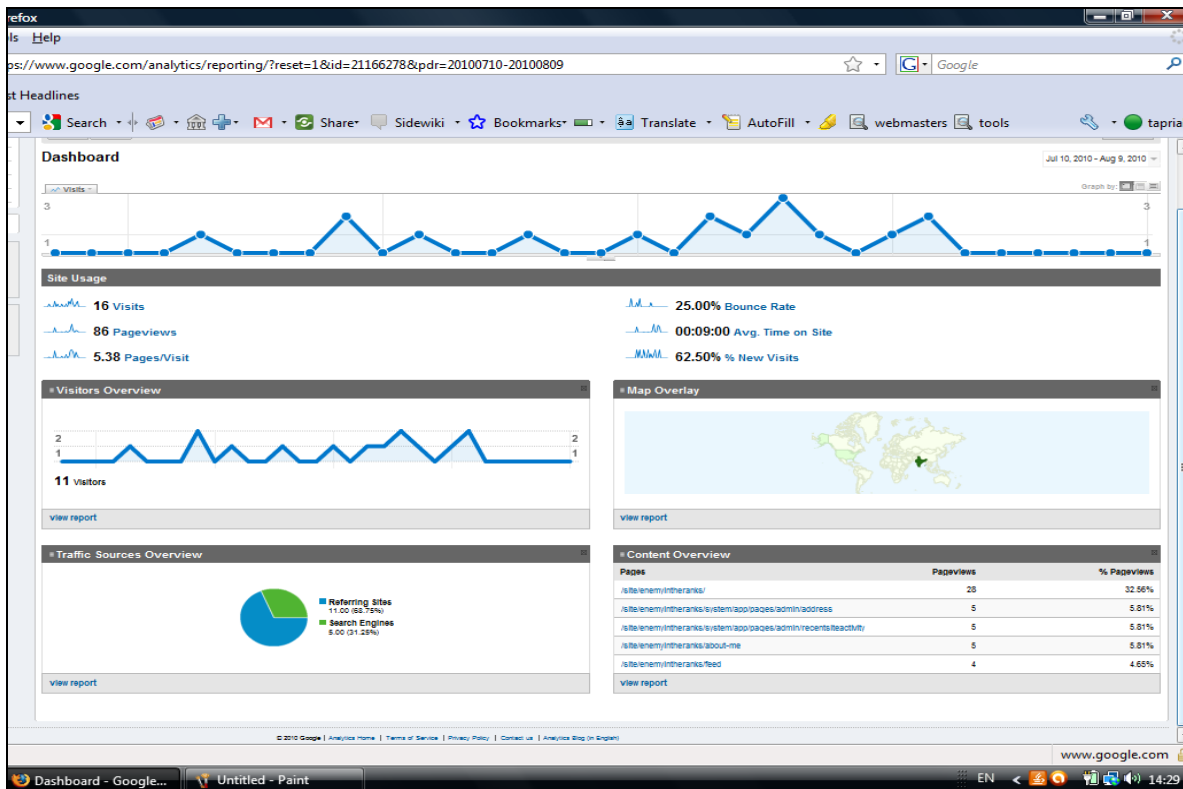
Figure 14.3 Google Analytics Tracking Results

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14.4 Google Traffic Estimation Tool

Another free tool that is actually meant for advertisers but can also be used by bloggers and website owners is the *Google traffic estimation tool*. This tool allows you to zero in on the keywords you would like to use in the blog post. This information becomes important at times because the readers may be using a different search term than what the blogger has used to identify the same content. For example, "*Dental health*" and "*oral health*" are phrases used interchangeably by many people. In the figure below (Figure 14.4) we chose "*Dental Health*" and Google tells us that in India the average monthly searches with respect to this keyword are 6600.
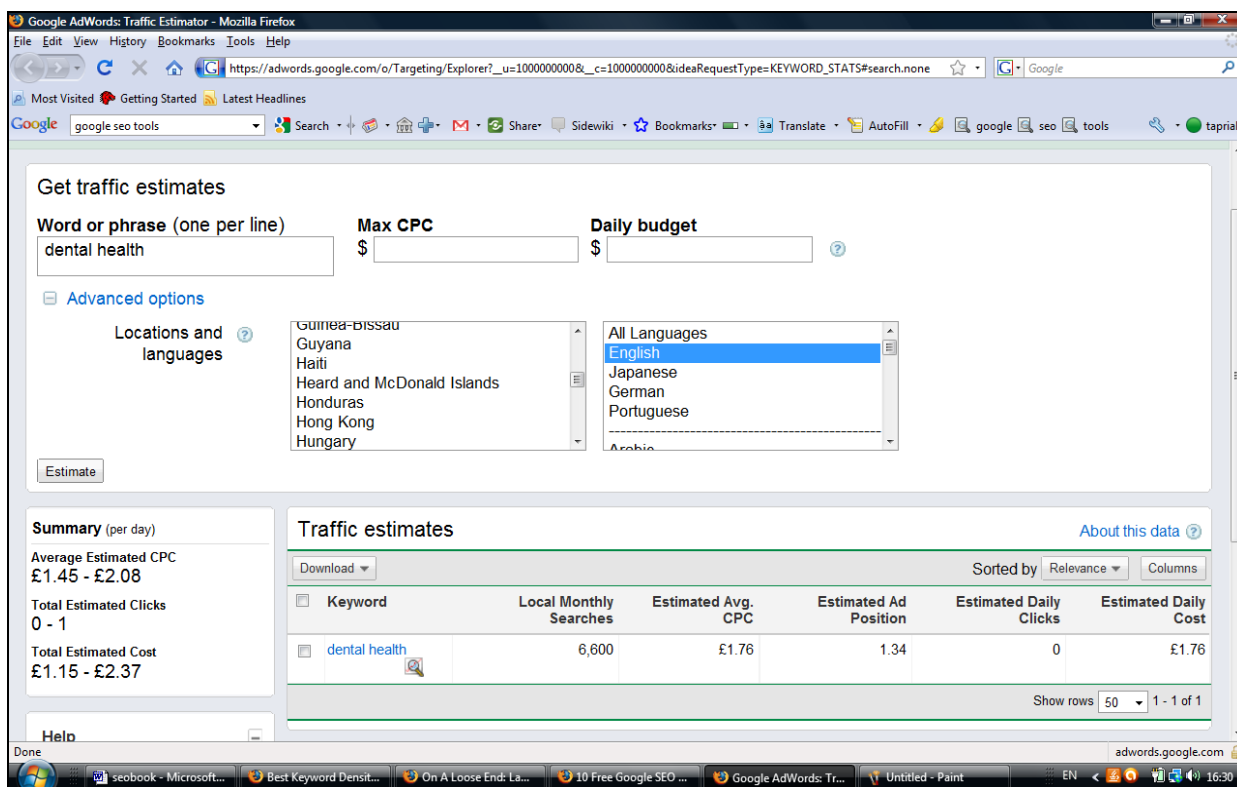
Figure 14.4 Google Traffic Estimation Tool

14.5 Google Website Optimiser

Website optimiser is a tool that can be used to improve the pages or parts of the pages by analysing the effectiveness of prospective changes made in your website/blog. In other words, the tool helps one to carry out experiments with the website/blog. This is specifically useful if one is looking at conversions. The blogger can set up an experiment and Google conducts the experiment on the blogger's behalf.

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14.6 Hit Counters

Hit counters are widgets that can be embedded in a blog to keep track of how many people visited the blog, and how many pages were seen by them. There are many hit counters available online for free like **Histats.com** shown in Figure 14.5. All one needs is to register with the website providing the hit counter and provide the URL of the blog to be tracked. There are a variety of counters available and one can select the style, colour and type of button for the blog and also choose the number at which the page views or visitors counting should start. For installing the widget an HTML code is provided which needs to be embedded in the blog. As soon as the code is put in place, data is visible in real-time. The advantage of having a hit counter on the blog is that we can straight away come to know how many people have visited the blog rather than having to log into analytics. If required the counter can be hidden from the visitors and it would be visible only to the blogger after logging in.

Figure 14.5 Website for Free Web Stats and Hit Counter - Histats.com

14.7 Google Alerts

Google Alerts is a powerful tool to keep you updated on the latest relevant news results across the World Wide Web pages in relation to certain specified keywords. The search alert can be further narrowed down based on your choice of the "*type*" of query or topic (web, news, blogs etc). See Figure 14.6. Using this tool one can set up Google to send an alert, in the form of an email (as specified by the user) whenever the Google search engine manages to match your search term.

The tool can be used to monitor the mentions of your own brand/products online, to monitor the activity of the competitors, or just keep a tab on the new developments on topics of your interest. It is also a good source for content ideas for the business blog.
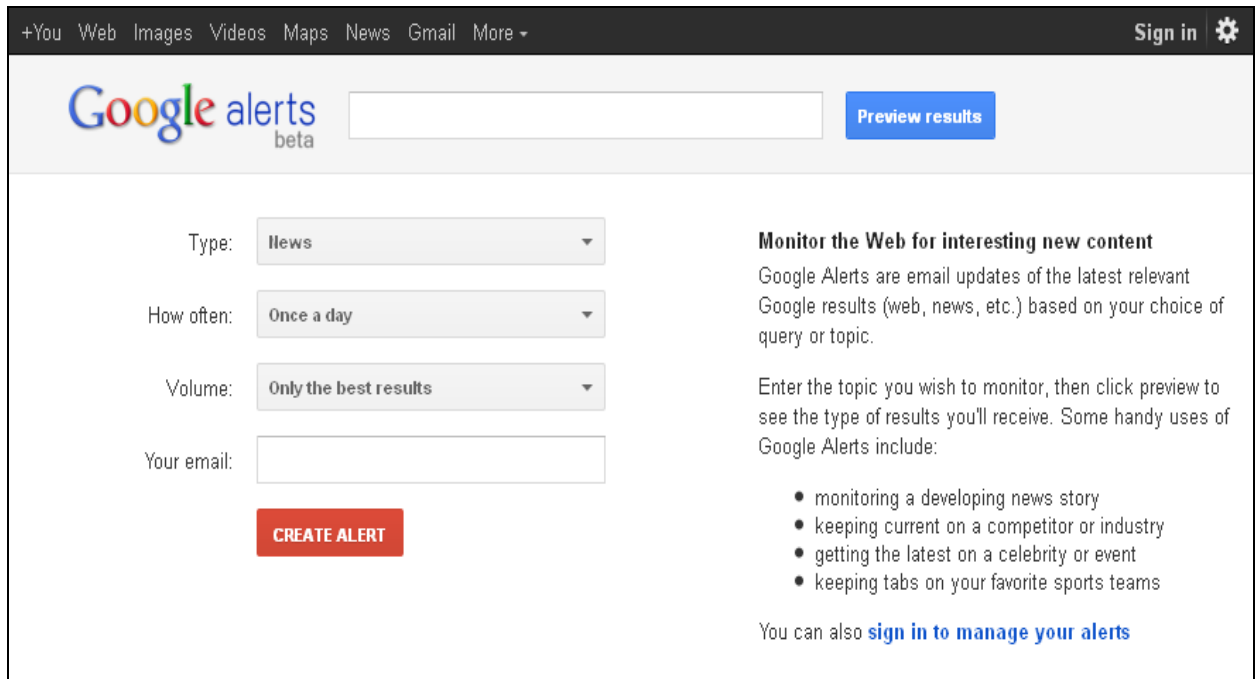
Figure 14.6 Google Alerts Home Page

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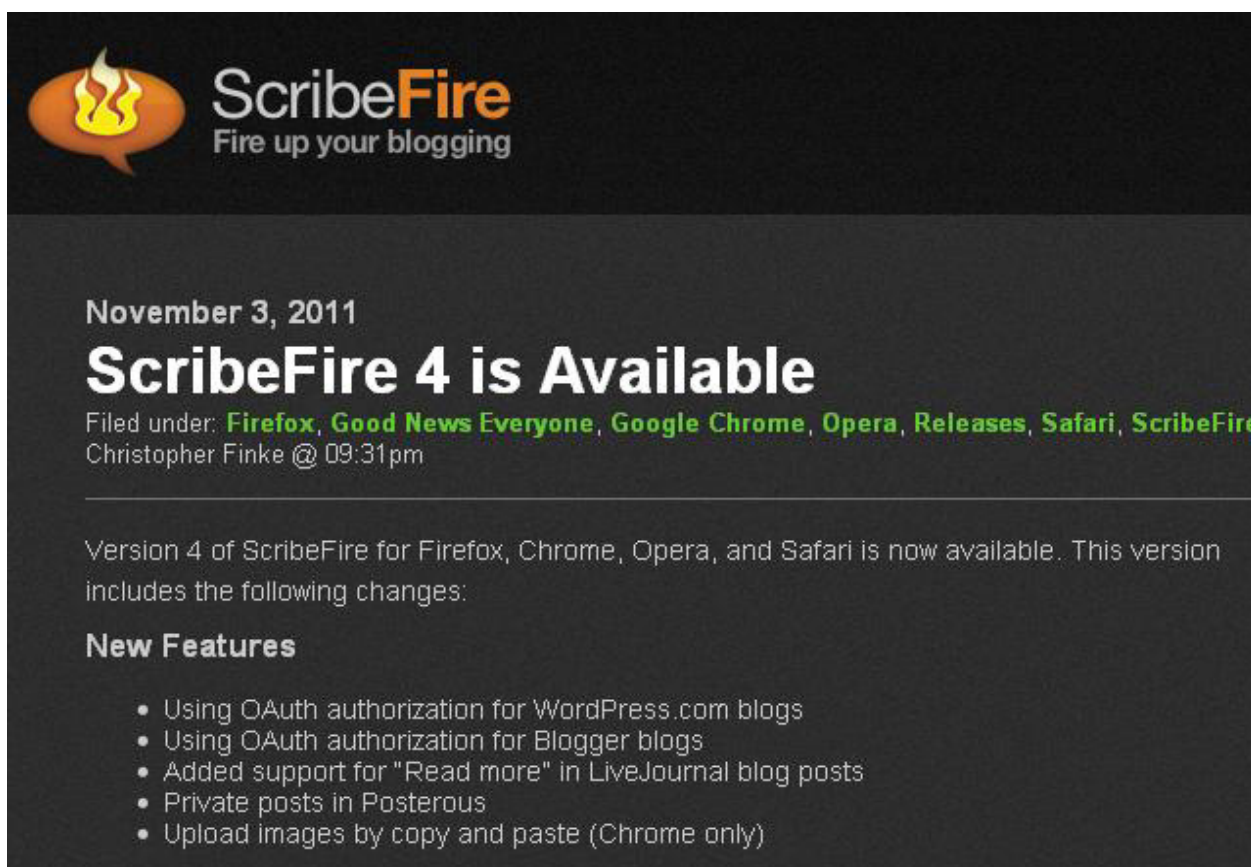
14.8 Google Suggest

This tool is available within the Google search bar on the Google home page. You must have noticed that as you are typing a search query into the box provided, Google automatically suggests the word you might be looking for. It appears as a drop down box. The lesser-known fact is that the suggestions are made as per the popularity of keywords. Use this tool to your advantage especially when it comes to long tail keywords i.e. keywords with more than one word.

14.9 FeedBurner

Feedburner is a web feed management service, which provides custom RSS feeds, and management tools to bloggers and other web content publishers. In the conventional feeds there is no way of knowing how many visitors have subscribed to a blog, but *Feedburner* provides traffic analysis and the number of subscribers to a feed thereby helping the bloggers to improve their understanding of and relationship with their audience.

14.10 Scribefire

ScribeFire is an extension for the **Mozilla Firefox Web browser**, **Google Chrome Web browser**, **Opera Web Browser**, and **Apple Safari Web browser** that allow you to easily post content to all of your blogs. The latest version of Scribefire 4 is now available for download from the site. See Figure 14.7.

Figure 14.7 Latest Version of Scribefire 4 – Scribefire.com

THE END