



SALES BLOGGERS

Share Their Strategies

When it comes to social media, everybody's doing it (including Arianna and Ashton!). Meet five distributors who are becoming industry celebrities – and winning more business – through their savvy social networking strategies.

BY JENNIFER VISHNEVSKY

As co-founder and editor-in-chief of *The Huffington Post*, Arianna Huffington has propelled the progressive news Web site/aggregated blog to the top. Ranked as the number one blog by Technorati, www.thehuffingtonpost.com has more than 1 million comments each month. Since its launch in 2005, the blog has offered coverage of politics, media, business, world news and more.

Like *The Huffington Post*, a well-constructed and maintained blog can be a great tool for driving sales. Karen Silvers knows this firsthand.

Silvers, a corporate branding specialist with Halo/Lee Wayne (*asi/356000*), had fun on Halloween by participating in the marketing strategies of Chipotle and Menchie's, two local restaurant franchises.

Silvers blogged about dressing up like a burrito to earn a free entrée at Chipotle and then wearing a printed swirly hat from Menchie's to receive free yogurt. In her blog, she provided some suggestions for the companies to turn a short-term marketing strategy into a long-lasting constant reminder, thus improving their strategy using branded merchandise. The following week, she received a referral from Menchie's based on her ideas, which led to a business deal.

Sounds simple enough, but successful sales blogs take a well-thought-out strategy to thrive. Whether you're thinking of starting a blog or looking to revamp yours, we asked five hot bloggers to show you how to get the most from your experience.

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Case Studies Seal the Deal

BLOG EXCERPT

Right Sleeve News/Views: A Blog
www.swag20.com

RIGHT SLEEVE wins Image Award for Mesh Conference Swag!
February 3, 2010

Well, coming up with branded merchandise that will impress a discerning crowd is a daunting (though fun) task. With plenty of input from the Mesh team, we designed a survival kit to welcome attendees. Items ranged from the practical (peppermint gum) to the fun (poetry magnets) to the cheeky (condoms). Practical, fun, cheeky - exactly the makeup of this crowd. In addition to the survival kit, we produced T-shirts (that fit women too!), uniforms for the staff and scarves for the speakers.

After five years of designing swag for the Mesh team, we entered the 2009 merchandise into two industry award competitions - Image Awards (Canada) and Pyramid Awards (U.S.). This past week, we won the Image Award for Canada and we were a finalist in the U.S. competition.

A very special thank-you to the Mesh team for being such a fun and creative group to work with. Now on to #mesh10!



Mark Graham

› Be human.

For Mark Graham, president of Right Sleeve Marketing Inc. (*asi/308922*), blogging started about five years ago as another way to communicate with clients. Since then, Graham has found the blog to be a successful marketing

tool by exposing readers to the way the promotional design agency works. "I was really just looking to add another dimension to the business relationship that I had with customers," he says. Adding that extra dimension just

makes good business sense.

In terms of content, Graham posts about a range of topics in the industry. "If I had a particular experience within the promotional products industry or a certain point of view to put forward about customer service or marketing, I'll post that," he says.

Graham says that a key factor to the blog's success is honesty. He writes from a perspective of someone who wants to share information, as opposed to someone who's trying to sell. "It is somewhat of an indirect sell, because of course people who read the blog are going to probably give us more consideration when they're purchasing promotional items," he says.

As for sales, Graham has found that case studies and results of promotional campaigns serve as tangible examples of his company's abilities and have been the most successful in garnering business. "If we've written a good blog post about a success we've had, it adds a lot of credibility to our sales pitch.

And that will be that small thing that will tip the scale to allow us to get business," he says.

For example, Right Sleeve won the Image Award (Canada) for products it produced for the Mesh Conference, Canada's Web 2.0 Conference. Graham blogged about the process of designing the products and the connection between the recipients and the products themselves. "Just going through that case study really allowed our customers and prospects to see how we think about promotional product campaigns and the process that we go through," he says.

Graham's advice: Be a storyteller and don't be afraid to get your hands dirty. "You have to connect with an audience, build it up and blog on a regular basis. It's not easy for a person looking for a quick sale," he says. When connecting with readers, he focuses on reaching out for a mutual gain. "It's very important to contribute as much as we're asking for. We develop those relationships by making other people look good," he says.

Behind the Scenes

BLOG EXCERPT

www.mcmproductions.com

Laminated 100% Recycled Shopping Bags
February 18, 2010, by MCM Marketing Team

Can you get excited about a shopping bag? We think you can. Just think back a couple of years ago when hundreds of millions of us simply walked out of stores carrying all of our goods in plastic. The issues for our environment are staggering. It is calculated that we are using over 1,000,000 per minute and they are doing everything from filling landfills to killing wildlife.

Most of us have caught on and an enormous shift has taken place, with most consumers bringing their bags to go shopping every day. Now that's visibility. Large numbers of companies have taken advantage of this by using the traditional nonwoven tote which can be printed in small quantities ... Like most products, there is a lot of information to be shared and we would like to discuss your next project so that we can get you the perfect shopping bag.



Ken Block

› Focus on search engine optimization.

What started as an exercise in curiosity has developed into a successful Web strategy, and the birth of "Kenny Blog." Ken Block, director of business development with MCM Productions (*asi/257932*), had been studying Web-site development and social media and decided to give it a try.

Block entered into blogging from the technical world, focusing on analytics and search engine optimization (SEO). SEO is the process of increasing traffic from search engines. Typically, the higher a site appears in the search results list, the more visitors it will receive from the search engine. He

introduced the blog to his client base by giving away a pen to visitors who signed up to read the blog. After about six weeks, it was starting to get more hits than the Web site.

"We believe that if you are open with knowledge and the knowledge is greater than your competition, it's a slam dunk," he says. The blog helps the company book orders on a weekly basis. Block uses analytics to follow which search phrases drive traffic, such as his blog post about recycled PVC banner bags.

The phrase "dishwasher-safe water bottles" also quickly produced business. To optimize a blog, find relevant keyword phrases to target in your post. These keywords will serve as a promotional tool to create a funnel for back links, all pointing to the various pages of the Web site.

The language of the blog is very important. "We have to be cognizant and respectful of the demographics of all the different buyers of promotional products. If you write in a language that is specific to just Gen X, you

lose the baby boomers," Block says.

For new bloggers in the industry, he recommends taking the time to understand how search engines work. "You have to determine what you strategically want to accomplish with your blog before you write your first post," he says. Some of the ways to accomplish SEO on a blog are with keyword insertion into the blog title, links with appropriate anchor text, keyword tags and a descriptive URL that also includes keywords.

ADVANTAGES ADVICE

Looking for some keywords to optimize your blog post and skyrocket to page one on Google? Create some general tags throughout the post, like "promotional products" and "branded merchandise." Then, get specific with vital phrases for the item you're promoting. If you're writing about a wearables promotion for baseball season, include tags for "caps," "shirts" and "jerseys."

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Terrific Tweeters

As Ashton Kutcher became the first to attract 1 million followers on Twitter last year, the microblogging service really went mainstream. With more than 4 million followers now, Kutcher is the king of Twitter (even eclipsing Barack Obama!). Kutcher believes that the platform is not all about celebrities. And he's right – salespeople are now using the real-time site to prospect to their clients. Twitter provides the opportunity to continuously build your network, reach out to followers and get your pitch out there fast. Are these two avid Tweeters the Ashtons of our industry?



Gary Powell,
Owner, ImageWear Solutions (*asi/230410*)
@imagewear



Angel Barksdale,
Creative Marketing Specialist,
The Prestigious Mark Inc. (*asi/299267*)
@PromoGirl4U

Today's Tweets

All Biz 

Senior marketing execs see their companies moving to social media in 2010.

A Little Personality 

This reminds me of the time as a teen, that I asked the minister if I could date his daughter & he spent 3 hours telling me no!

After some research on the power of social media, Gary Powell decided to start Tweeting in mid-2009. To connect with an audience, he decided his focus would be on building a community. "We try to reach out to our local community more than anything. Social media is actually more about building a community of trust – reaching out and helping others," he says.

So how did he turn Twitter into a sales force? He connected with Kimberly LeRiche of JK Virtual Office, who was able to help him with Facebook and other social media platforms. In turn, Powell built a relationship with LeRiche's husband's new company, OTC Sports. ImageWear did some promotional products for the online sporting-goods company, and a client was formed through Twitter's community.

With the speed and frequency of posts, Powell warns Tweeters to be careful of their content. "Don't come on strong and just try to sell. It's really a fine line between marketing your stuff and reaching out to be part of your community," he says.

Powell keeps his Tweets on an 80/20 ratio, with 80% of Tweets having to do with his community and 20% focused on ImageWear. "Marketing falls into play when people see that you are serious about other things besides your own efforts," he says. That formula has attracted more than 800 followers.

Today's Tweets

All Biz 

Let me put your logo/brand on a water bottle at your next large event! Great gift, caring message!

A Little Personality 

After American Idol show, my 11 yr old gets in bed and asks, "If we went to Idol auditions and I changed my mind in line, would you be mad?"

As the aptly-named PromoGirl4U, Angel Barksdale has worked hard to put herself out in the social media world through her blog, Facebook and now Twitter. Like many others in the industry, she turned to a friend for some guidance. Barksdale connected with a local stylist who she followed on Facebook and Twitter. "She always had something to say and was making herself an expert in the field. That's what I wanted to mimic," she says.

One of Barksdale's best sales strategies is her online presence. "I am real. I sell my personality. I sell my creativity," she says. She does this by throwing in some personal tidbits every few days. She wants readers to view her as a human and see her personality.

A few times each month, Barksdale will post a picture of one of her favorite promotional products and include a quick blurb on why she is a fan. She'll include the price and leave it at that. Her followers then comment on the item and contact her for the sale. In four months, she booked four deals as a result of what she says on Twitter.

In addition to making sales, one of the benefits for Barksdale is expanding her network. "I've been able to connect with executives in the industry – people who would normally be out of reach," she says. And, by presenting various products and articles that appeal to different target audiences, she has expanded the diversity of her followers. "I Tweet about everything in the industry so that when people are using search engines, they come across me," she says.

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A Company's Focus

BLOG EXCERPT

we.motivators.com

The Power of Promotion

August 7, 2009 03:50, by Adam

When you create your promotional program you need to be so careful to think about every possible outcome and consequence. Recently Yahoo! published a story titled, 10 Promotional Stunts That Horribly Backfired.

Many of you have seen the commercial for LifeLock. LifeLock is a company that promises, for a monthly fee, they will completely protect you from any and all identity theft. Not only that, they also have claimed that any time identity theft does occur under their coverage they will pay to fix. LifeLock's CEO was so confident in his service, as shown in his commercial, that his promotional giveaway was a card ... that had his social security number on it ... next to a giant truck ... with his social security number on it. This resulted in people trying to steal his identity. Now, had Todd Davis come to Motivators, he would have found an item we carry that is a shining symbol of identity theft security, the Combination Lock Flash Drive, item number 30593. Nowadays, the flash drive has replaced the CD or a portable hard drive for storing important information. With the Combination Lock Flash Drive, it will always stay protected if it is lost or stolen. Remember, you don't need to take a high risk to have a highly successful promotion.



Adam Brown

» Use real-world scenarios.

When Adam Brown joined Motivators Inc. (*asi/277780*) in 2009, he was struck by the emphasis the company puts on connecting with their customer. He embraced the company's support for blogging.

"In sales, everyone has their own method and things they do to differentiate themselves. Blogging is great way to show who you are," Brown says. "The best way to increase sales is to zero in on one category or one item and really bring it into real-world relevance and show how it can help the customer."

Brown did this with the Leed's Combination Lock USB Flash Drive. In a blog post, Brown discussed LifeLock, a company that promises they will protect users from identity theft. The LifeLock CEO publicized his social security number, which resulted in people trying to steal his identity. Brown took the real-world case to sell the flash drive as a way to protect oneself. The blog worked – that one post increased sales of the product by about 400%.

Brown believes that using the real world to connect with clients – both existing and potential – is one of the most important elements of blogging.

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Karen Silvers

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BLOG EXCERPT

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When her clients started asking about what's new and hot, Silvers realized she was sitting on the foundation for a great blog. She started her blog in April 2009 after answering several phone calls about researching promotional products. "A lot of my clients are cutting-edge and they want to be the first to try something," she says.

Now, Silvers posts daily on her blog titled, "Oh, Are You Marketing? I Haven't Noticed!" Her format is consistent – with posts containing a photo of a product and a note on how to use the item for the best results. "The point of my blog is not to sell the exact item that I'm featuring that day. My goal is to show all the ways that I can help a company, depending on what their problem is," she says.

As far as sales strategies, Silvers finds that free samples drive new clients. She also withholds pricing information to encourage readers to e-mail her and ask questions. "It's not just the item, it's what project they're looking to use it for," she says.

Recently she had a business coach contact her after seeing her blog, looking for information on a few gifts she had featured in a post. She asked what the prospective client's goals were with the gifts, which led to a large order of even higher-priced items. "The client knew I was a professional and I knew what I was talking about," she says.

Silvers' most popular blog was about the "I'm Not a Paper Cup" mug, where she showed clients they could be eco-friendly and cutting-edge at the same time. The blog showed up in search engines and she got business from new clients because they were looking for the mug, as well.

Silvers has labeled herself as a "Promo Marketing Expert" and makes sure the blog helps her live up to her name. "It's a good companion for my sales efforts because I say I'm an expert – go check out my advice online," she says. The blog is also helping her grow personally. "I still learn about new products and new ways to use them. I find it beneficial for me to brainstorm on how I can use certain items," she says.

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The Voice of Authority



Bobby Lehew

BLOG EXCERPT

www.bobbylehew.typepad.com

Social Media and B2B: Circuitous ROI

Perhaps the B2B and small-business world regards social media with fierce skepticism due to the erroneous impression of immediate return. In other words, because we can immediately publish by our own hands ads, blog posts, Facebook fan pages, tweets and many other profiles and social trails on the Web, perhaps we subconsciously believe the return on our investment would be equally as simple and quick. "Immediate publication should equal immediate publicity." The problem is, publication and publicity are not synonymous.

The wasteland of the Web is littered with business ventures that scrapped together enough talent to throw up an attractive shingle on the Web. The creation of a clever idea (or a clever blog or a clever Facebook fan page) is rather simple. I'd rather have a good sales or marketing professional who can sell the hell out of a mediocre idea than a genius who cranks out an idea a day but can't get it off the ground. In the industry I'm in, I'm constantly given great ideas for new products from acquaintances. Coming up with new ideas is not hard. Selling the idea: determining the market, how to go to market, the funding to get to market - the sweat that makes the beefy portion of the sizzle digestible - that's hard work.

› Be a thought leader.

Social Networking Soars

A recent University of Maryland survey shows social media usage among small businesses has doubled: an increase to 24% in 2009, up from 12% in 2008. Further, three out of four respondents reported use of a company social-networking Web page, tied to a site like Facebook or LinkedIn. An additional 40% of respondents say they have created a blog, where they post entries related to their areas of expertise.

About 26% of those surveyed send Tweets about their business field, while 16% use Twitter as a customer service tool. "Social media levels the playing field for small businesses by helping them deliver customer service," says Janet Wagner, director of the Center for Excellence in Service. "Time spent on Twitter, Facebook and blogs is an investment in making it easier for small businesses to compete."

When Bobby Lehew started blogging in 2003, social media was practically nonexistent. Luckily, his early start familiarized him with the plat-

form so he could use it as a business tool. Two years later, Lehew, director of operations for Robyn Promotions *continued on page 95*

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“Everyone tends to view social media through the lens of advertising and marketing. If they viewed it as communication, they would adapt a lot easier.”

Bobby Lehew,
Robyn Promotions (*asi/309656*)

(*asi/309656*), launched “Branded Matters,” a source for information on how to create, manage and distribute promotional products and collateral material.

Lehew has noticed that many salespeople are struggling with using blogs as an actual tool for business. Blogging is a slow burn and can sometimes be a long way from a result. “Everyone tends to view social media through the lens of advertising and marketing. If they viewed it as communication, they would adapt a lot easier,” he says. He reiterates: Blogging is an enhancement, not a replacement of traditional sales methods. “What you’re doing online directly affects what you are doing offline,” he says.

So how does Lehew’s blog bring in business? He has a link on his blog to the company store where prospects can contact him. It’s also a repository for articles that he can then forward to those prospects. For example, he was sitting with a six-figure client talking about company stores. When Lehew suggested he provide some of his articles on the topic, the client mentioned that he had already received and read them. “We were sitting in the office with them because they perceived us to be the experts,” he says.

In his blog, Lehew uses an authoritative voice to separate himself from the field. “I’m trying to be seen as a thought leader. I use the blog as an idea incubator. It becomes an important tool for shaping business growth,” he says.

Lehew encourages new bloggers to keep their consultative hat on. He also advises bloggers that if they are intending to blatantly sell through social media, they should tell their readers up front.

Lehew’s blog has about 150 regular readers a week. To some, that might not seem like a lot. But as he points out, “If it’s the right readers, that’s all that matters.” ▲

Jennifer Vishnevsky is a staff writer for Advantages.

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