

How to jump-start your blog

It's been [gasp] seven long months since I posted anything on this blog. Before my last post, I had been posting about monthly (ish), but it became harder to come up with good ideas. And I believe if you have nothing worthwhile to say (blog), then don't say (blog) anything.

But here we are in a new year, and it is time for a fresh start. I need to jump-start my blog, and here is how to do it.

Do I really want to blog again?

The most crucial question to ask is: Do I really want to or need to start blogging again? There's no getting around that blogging requires a good deal of work, commitment, and time. Perhaps you don't have the resources to blog, or the motivation to do it consistently.

If you decide not to start blogging again, I recommend eliminating or at least hiding the blog from your website. An outdated blog is the equivalent of a dusty, cobweb covered office. When I visit a website, I always check on the blog to see when it was last updated, and if it hasn't been updated in a while, I am not sure if the business or organization is still active.

If you do want to blog, take these 5 steps:

1. Get clear on your motivation or goal for the blog.

Remember or reset your objective for blogging. What do you want to accomplish? It could be:

- Thought leadership
- Lead generation
- Inform your target audience
- Advocate for a cause
- Provide added value for your customers

2. Brainstorm topics and issues

Once you know what you want to do, then you have to think of ideas or topics. I recommend setting up a brainstorming session (if you have a team, definitely get them involved). Start with topics/categories and then get down to specifics. For example, an animal defense charity could list topics such as: animal rights, endangered species, etc. With that topic list in mind, start thinking of specific issues you want to cover, such as: new laws that are affecting animal rights, new additions to endangered species, , etc.

3. List your keywords

Blogs still work to improve your search engine optimization (SEO). You may have a plug-in on your blog to help with SEO (e.g., All in One SEO, Yoast). However, you have to be strategic in your blogging and use keywords and key phrases that you want your website to rank for. Take the time to do some keyword research and then list your target keywords/key phrases.

4. Set up an editorial calendar

When you put things in writing, you have a better chance that they get done. An editorial calendar is a great tool to make blogging happen. You will have an overview of what you want to write and when you will publish it. It doesn't need to be complex or require special software.

To create an editorial calendar, set up a table or spreadsheet with these tabs (at minimum):

- Month/Date
- Topic/category
- Subject/working title
- Author
- Target keywords

If you need some additional information or templates, check

out “How to Create an Editorial Calendar [example + templates]” on Hubspot or “Editorial Calendar Tools and Templates To Help You Master Your Content To-Do List” from the Content Marketing Institute.

5. Find inspiration

To make it easier to find relevant issues to write about, seek out inspiration. Here are a few ways to find inspiration:

- Set up Google Alerts for your topics
- Follow relevant hashtags on social media
- Read industry publications
- Attend professional development events or presentations about your subject

Now, you should be set to start blogging [again].

Please let me know in the comments if you’ve stopped blogging and why, and whether you plan to restart your blog.

Yes, there’s still value in blogging

It’s been a while

I haven’t written a blog post in months. It’s been hard to concentrate, and it’s been even harder to find something to talk about when we are all consumed by the pandemic and its effects. But this morning I got a comment on a blog post I wrote well over a year ago. The post was about bad email

marketing practices, and the comment came from Eddie in New Zealand, who'd been targeted by the same spam marketer I referenced in the post. Eddie wanted to share his similar experience, and how he dealt with it. I assume he did a search about that particular spammer, and found my post, and then found the post to be relevant to him.

So thanks Eddie, for sharing your thoughts, but also for giving me an idea for a new blog post: the value of blogging.

Blogging = being found

Blogging consistently about the stuff you know best results in your website (and, by extension, you or your organization) being found when someone is looking for information on a specific topic. This is the theory behind inbound marketing.

Why I blog

I have been writing this blog for nearly twelve years for two main reasons:

- It provides an outlet for my thoughts on marketing communications
- It helps me to be found (and may lead to business)

Two things you absolutely must have to be found

Writing a blog is one of the most effective ways to boost your ability to be found, and to establish your particular expertise. There's almost no need for tinkering with your SEO if you are writing about you know, using appropriate tags, and including specific keywords. However, to really reap the benefits of blogging, you have to fulfill two things:

1. House your blog on your own website. Do not outsource it to Medium or any other third party.
2. Write what you know, and/or what you think (in other words, be original and authentic by providing something from your own perspective and experience).

Bottom line:

If you've ever doubted the value of having a blog, don't.

4 key steps to get your blog back on track for 2019

If you, like me, have been neglecting your blog, you've probably got a few good reasons (or excuses). Maybe you took time off during the holidays. Maybe preparing for the holidays and the new year took over your life. Maybe you just haven't been inspired to write. Whatever the case may be, your blog is calling out for attention and now, at the beginning of 2019, is the perfect time to get it back on track.



Here are four key steps you can take to get your blog back on track:

1. **Clarify your objective.** Blogs flounder when you don't know why you are writing them. Ask yourself what your blog is meant to do. Is it supposed to establish your expertise? Is it part of your content marketing strategy? Perhaps it's meant to help in lead generation, email sign-ups or to encourage ebook downloads. Whatever you are trying to accomplish, that is your objective. Writing it down, and being clear about it will help motivate you going forward.
2. **Define your topic area (s).** What are you writing about? What topics does your blog deal with? Do these reflect your expertise, interests and specializations? Making a list of topics you may write about helps give you inspiration. Also, those could be the basis for research.
3. **Scope out the competition.** Are there a lot of other blogs or websites that offer information on your topic areas? If so, are you offering any unique or different take on the topic? What would be a reason for someone to read something on the topic on your blog rather than going elsewhere? You want to stand out from your competition by providing specialized insights or unique takes that can't be found elsewhere.
4. **Create an editorial guide and/or calendar for 2019.** Create a framework for your blogging this year. Start with the calendar and write down any special dates or events you will be participating in. Those may be the basis for blog posts. If you are looking for something more formal, or if you collaborate with others, there are many free and paid resources on the web for creating a content calendar.

Bonus step: Now that you've been giving some serious thought to what you want your blog to do this year, brainstorm at

least 10 blog post ideas.

Clarifying what you want to achieve, and defining your topic areas will help provide direction for your blog, and get you back on track.

Please let me know in the comments if there are other methods you've used to revive a blog.

4 lessons from WordCamp DC that will improve your website

This past weekend, I attended my sixth WordCamp (!). This time I only had to travel as far as Washington, D.C., which (finally) was hosting its first WordCamp. The past few times I've been to Baltimore and Philadelphia. In case you don't know, WordCamp is a volunteer-led conference featuring talks and workshops on various WordPress and website/blog related issues. Since this website/blog is built on WordPress, and WordPress is also a platform for so many other websites big and small, I find it extremely useful to learn more about WordPress and attend WordCamp.

This time, I made it to about 11 presentations out of a total 60. As usual, some of the presentations were really useful and/or interesting. Although I picked up several nuggets, I had four big take-aways.

Be generous

Have you ever clicked on a blog post that promised you some good information, but found out instead that the post was a

sales pitch for the book/webinar/course where you could pay to access the information? I hate that and so does Tracy Schorn, who is the author of the very popular Chump Lady blog. Her main advice from “How to Build a Popular Blog and Master WordPress Even If You Are a Liberal Arts Major” is to be generous. Tracy says you should offer solutions, help people and be a resource for your readers.

Of course, Tracy works hard at her blog too. She writes a post every weekday, and answers her readers’ questions. Tracy is definitely on to something, as she is living the blogger’s dream. Her blog became so popular that she was able to write a book, get it published and then get it optioned for a TV series! Oh, and she makes money of her blog too.

Many ways to improve your SEO

John Victoria runs a SEO/digital marketing agency and his talk was “10 Reasons Why Your Site is Nowhere to be Found on Google (and what to do about it).” The answer to getting your site to be found on Google is SEO—search engine optimization. Being in the first page of Google’s organic search results is crucial if you want potential customers to find you.

Among his suggestions:

- Check your site loading speed—a slow load will turn off readers
- Submit your URL to Google
- Backlinks to your site matter. But, do not, under any circumstances, pay to get lots of backlinks to your site. Focus on quality not quantity.
- Submitting an article to a leading publication/site in your field is a great way to build quality backlinks and third-party credibility
- Use your keywords judiciously—do not keyword stuff and think of other ways of saying the same thing (e.g., dentist, dental practice).

Take a step now toward enhanced website security

Websites get hacked all the time. Sometimes the hackers are trying to make money by redirecting your traffic to another site. Sometimes they are trying to spread malware. Whatever the reason, this is something you, as a website/blog owner, need to work hard to avoid. And it does take work and know-how. According to Adam Warner of SiteLock, from his talk “5 Steps to Personal and Website Security,” even taking one step helps. Some of what he recommended:

- Have strong passwords, do not repeat them and consider using a password manager
- Install SSL on your website, which, as a bonus, gives you an SEO boost
- Use a plug-in to limit the amount of logins into your site
- Do not use public Wi-Fi networks that are not password protected

Design matters

I really liked Annie Smidt’s talk “Easy Design Tips for Non Designers.” She says (and I completely agree) that design can make your site look credible, and can also help visitors like your site. We all know how important it is to make a good first impression.

Some things Annie suggested non-designers should consider:

- Have a hierarchy—the most important message must stand out
- Consistency is important
- Your color palette should match your audience and the mood you are trying to create (Annie provided some great sites/ideas on how to come up with palettes too)
- Typography increases comprehension, so choose typefaces carefully and don’t use too many fonts (she says having two is good: one serif, one sans serif)

One important tidbit I learned from Annie was how to make em-dashes on WordPress. All you have to do is use the Omega button to access special characters. I've already done it in this post!

You can read her slides [here](#), and see her excellent suggestions on where to get color palette ideas.

There were dozens of other sessions on three different tracks. Some were targeted to developers and some to those who work in government or big institutions. Most of them should be available on WordPress TV.

I highly recommend attending a WordCamp in person. It's fun, you'll learn new stuff and great hacks, meet new people, and not to mention, you'll get a t-shirt. For a list of upcoming WordCamps, just check WordCamp Central. There are WordCamps everywhere!

Is it time for the corporate blog to die?

At a communications event last week, the three panelists were asked what communications channel they felt was overrated. The answer that stood out to me the most was the panelist who said she just wanted to see the corporate blog die already because, in her opinion, nobody visits/reads corporate blogs.

I disagree. Here are a few reasons why:

The corporate/organizational blog is an integral part of any **content marketing strategy**.

It's **owned media** that can help with your SEO, though leadership, lead generation and so much more.

For smaller organizations, blogs are an **easy way to add fresh content** regularly.

Blogs are **flexible and media friendly**—you can post images, graphics, video, audio and/or text.

Regularly updated blogs serve as a clue to your website visitors that your website (and your organization) is **current**.

Blog posts are a great **opportunity to respond** to current events/situations/policies in a timely manner, and in more depth than on other social media outlets.

Organizational blogs serve a purpose, when done thoughtfully and strategically. But far too many organizations don't consider what they wish to achieve with the blog that they feel they must have.

So yes, corporate blogs without a strategy or purpose behind them should die. But they can and should be resurrected to achieve one of the many things I have pointed out above. What do you think? What's your experience with corporate/organizational blogs? When do you read them?

Blogging is easy until it's not

I've been blogging for years, since early 2008. That's almost eight years in which I have blogged here, on a personal blog, for clients, and even developed a training workshop to teach people how to blog. I love the format—it's generally quick and up until recently, it's been easy. But lately, blogging has gotten harder and harder. It's a struggle to come up with one good blog post a week when in my heyday, I wrote several blog posts a week.

What's going on? I can only speak for myself, but here it is:

1. Blogging itself is easy but coming up with relevant, meaningful posts is hard. Lately, I see lots of posts that are just crap. They recycle information or they post obvious "tips." I want to create original and creative posts, and lately, I don't have a lot to add to the conversation.

2. There's plenty (too much?) of competition. There's so much to read and we have limited time. I know I scan through the headlines on my Feedly and probably only read a small percentage of articles. It feels overwhelming to try to stand out with so much out there.

3. And of course, we are being told by the "experts" how to make our blog posts better: add images, make sure to optimize for SEO, and on and on. In other words, put more work into it. I am a fan of writing and posting quickly, while still posting something that is grammatically correct and typo-free. I don't enjoy looking for images for a post, although I know why it's important but to me it makes the posting so much more onerous.

4. There are real-world consequences. On a personal blog, all we are doing is sharing our thoughts. If people flock to it,

then so much the better. On a business blog, we are doing “content marketing.” We are trying to help our websites and increase our business. We are establishing “thought leadership.” Whatever our business goals are, they can and should be measured, and they can and should impact our bottom line.

These aren’t excuses. I will continue blogging—it’s important. But it’s not as easy as it used to be.

What about you? Are you finding that blogging is harder to get done? If so, why? And how do you counter it?

3 big reasons to avoid sarcasm in your business blog

A few weeks ago I came across a blog post with a headline that said something like “Why my business is getting off Facebook immediately.” Naturally, I was intrigued. But then I read the article, which told me the many reasons why it would be stupid for him or anybody to leave Facebook, saying things such as: Yes, I want to get off the fastest growing social network that has 800 million readers and counting.

The article, awash in sarcasm, was *designed* to make readers feel stupid for considering leaving Facebook.

I had been drawn in a headline that I didn’t realize was sarcastic until I read the blog post—a prime example of bait and switch. I felt angry and insulted that the author thought that anybody considering getting off Facebook was stupid.

And then last week, I came across this article on Ragan.com: 31 terms that will complicate your writing. The headline is not sarcastic, but the article is. However, the article is written pretty badly—I was confused as were many other readers as evidenced by the comments. The article, in my opinion, does not work at all.

I asked Brad Phillips, author of the Mr. Media Training blog, what he thought about using sarcasm in professional communication. Here's what he said:

The challenge is to make sure people don't take a comment you meant sarcastically as a straightforward, more serious one. Therefore, I try to always either preface a sarcastic comment with an obviously absurd rhetorical question or put it in italics to make clear that it stands apart from the rest of the post.

Exactly. **Your reader or audience has to understand you are being sarcastic.** If not, there will be misunderstanding and in essence, a lack of communication.

When you decide to use sarcasm, you run three big risks:

1. You risk irritating or even alienating your reader

According to *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Clear Communication* by Kris Cole, sarcasm inhibits communication: "Sarcasm in fact is in the same league as name-calling, ridiculing and shaming; and it leads to the same results."

In intra-personal relationships, sarcasm can be extremely damaging. According to the post *The Damage of Using Sarcasm in Workplace Communication* by Skip Weisman:

There is no positive upside to using sarcasm. It offers only short-term positive impact for the sarcastic person whose ego may get a boost by putting others down in this manner.

Now, it will be couched in the context of humor and trying to be funny. Yet, that humor comes at the expense of someone else.

In essence, your sarcasm is a put-down to your audience, which can certainly lead to irritation and alienation.

2. You risk being misunderstood

Because sarcasm is a type of passive-aggressive communication – where you say one thing but mean another – there is a very good chance that your meaning will be misconstrued or lost.

It may be challenging for your readers to know that you are being sarcastic and as Brad Phillips said above, they may think you are being serious when in fact you are not.

Because sarcasm is often dependent on tone, and it is hard to express tone in writing, you will be forced to use devices like quotation marks or strike-throughs to make your meaning clear.

3. Your risk seeming ethnocentric and culturally insensitive

Sarcasm does not travel well across cultures. While American culture tends to be very sarcastic, other cultures are not. And even within the U.S., there are regional differences. According to *The Science of Sarcasm?* Yeah, Right in *Smithsonian Magazine*:

Northerners also were more likely to think sarcasm was funny: 56 percent of Northerners found sarcasm humorous while only 35 percent of Southerners did. The New Yorkers and male students from either location were more likely to describe themselves as sarcastic.

Would you ever write a sarcastic white paper or case study? Probably not. Why? Because you think of white papers and case studies as serious documents, intended to share information and/or communicate a finding. Instinctively, we avoid sarcasm in “serious” communications. And many people don’t see blogging on the same level as other, more formal, writing.

The truth is that sarcasm is often used as a distancing technique, and it can be extremely corrosive to clear communication. You should avoid it in business blogging.

How do you feel about sarcasm in business blogging? Do you use it? Do you avoid it?

The week’s best brew: super-caFFEinated articles

As I type this, it is snowing outside (again). Let’s hope this is the last time this season! Spring starts this evening, at 6:45 p.m. and we are all ready for warmer temps and NO MORE SNOW! But I digress.

Following, you will find seven of the most interesting and/or useful articles I have read and shared in the past couple of weeks. So pour yourself a nice cup of something brewed, and have fun reading!

On blogs and blogging:

3 Google Analytics Reports to Help You Find Blog Post Ideas Your Readers Will Love

The Anatomy of a Perfect Blog Post

How Well Do You Fact-Check Your Content

On writing and copy editing:

Like Versus As

12 Writing Exercises That Will Transform Your Copy Today

12 Useless Public Relations Terms

20 Embarrassing Phrases Even Smart People Misuse

Happy spring!

One action to take to guarantee blog continuity

I used to blog a couple of times a week, sometimes more. Then, after six years, I reduced my blogging to once per week, with the occasional second post in the same week. My aim is to be consistent, and I always want to have at least one blog post each week, no matter what.

Consistency is key to keeping your blog viable. If you take off for months on end, people forget about your blog. And if you don't blog regularly, it is hard to promote your blog.

So what are you going to do when you can't or won't post on a regular, consistent schedule?

Some share old posts. In many cases, that's not sustainable.

After all, a blog is generally about timeliness and being topical. Although some blog posts have value long after you post them, you can't be wholly dependent on a few old posts.

Some hire a ghostblogger. Paying a third party to produce blog posts on a continual basis can be an excellent solution if you can afford it *and* you can provide good instruction to the blogger for hire. You will also have to supervise the blog posts, and make sure they are meeting your audience's needs and your organization's voice.

Some solicit guest writers. This is a great option if you can find the right person to guest post on your blog.

The one action you should do to prevent this situation from happening in the first place? *Write an evergreen post once a month or so.* (Evergreen means that it can be used at any time.) File it away. This way, when you are in the situation where you can't or won't blog, you have fresh material to post. If you are like me, there are times when you are feeling more creative or more focused, and writing seems easier. Take advantage and write up a blog post. Another plus of doing this is that you can work on your post to perfect it before posting. More editing time, more time to find images, and more time to work on the headline.

If writing an extra post each month seems daunting, perhaps start with having a regular brainstorming session (say once a month or once a quarter) where you challenge yourself to come up with five to ten blog post ideas. Keep that list on file and when you are feeling blocked, you will have something to work on.

We all get derailed but that doesn't mean we can't get back on track. Having a back up plan is a smart blogging policy.

What do you do when you can't blog?

How high is your website's barrier to entry?

Recently, I came across an article about how the Jewish online magazine Tablet is dealing with comments. It has decided to charge a fee to allow people to comment in order to make it harder for trolls to post obnoxious (and often anti-Semitic) comments. But there is an unintended consequence, and that is that legitimate commenters will now be dissuaded from commenting as well. The barrier to entry may prove too high.

Have you ever thought about how a visitor interacts with your website? What does that person need to do to find what he or she is looking for? What information is crucial and how easy is it to access it?

If you have been seeing a low conversion rate on your website, a drop in visitors, or a high bounce rate, perhaps you need to examine whether you have created an unintended (and intangible) barrier to entry or have built a barrier to entry that is too high.

Many websites have barriers to entry. Some are easily "climbed" and some are like Mount Everest, impossible. Generally, these barriers include "mechanical" barriers such as subscription fees, sign up forms, or registration requirements. Some barriers are more subtle, intangible, but still make it hard for visitors to access your content.

Mechanical barriers: High, medium and low walls to climb

In an effort to generate revenue from online readers, newspapers have added online **subscription fees**. That's a high barrier to entry, since visitors will not only have to sign up, but provide payment. Some websites require **registration**, generally your email and a password. That's also a medium barrier to entry. Yet other websites splash a newsletter **sign-up** before you can read the content, but generally you can close that out making it a low barrier to entry.

There are good reasons to create these barriers. After all, you may want to grow your marketing database or get some insight into who is visiting your website, or like many newspapers, you are looking for a source of revenue.

Intangible barriers: Creating a psychological "wall"

But barriers are not just mechanical or even visible. Your barriers to entry may be intangible and psychological. By that I mean that your barriers are tripping visitors' heads. For example, your **website navigation** may not be intuitive or clear and may make it hard to for visitors to find what they are looking for.

Another hard-to-quantify barrier is the **language** that you choose to use on your website. Many tech and government websites are flush with jargon that is *nearly unintelligible* to an outsider.

Some websites make it hard for visitors by having too much **content** or information to sort through. Have you ever landed on a page that made your eyes and head hurt from information overload (or worse, visual overload)? Then you probably know what I mean, and I bet you just went elsewhere.

How would you classify your website in terms of

barrier to entry? High, medium or low? Is it what you want or are you unintentionally turning visitors away?