Building a Blog Empire for Profit

PART I: AN INTRODUCTION TO BLOGS AND BLOGGING

The New Media

In September of 2004, the CBS News program "60 Minutes II" ran a special on President George Bush's service in the Texas National Guard during the Vietnam War. One of the pieces of data they displayed was a memo allegedly written by the late Lieutenant Colonel Jerry B. Killian. As soon as the memo flashed across the screen, the New Media began an investigation that would lead to in the firing of three CBS News executives and the retirement of longtime anchor Dan Rather.

At issue was a simple question: was the memo authentic? CBS News assured the public it was, citing handwriting and document experts. Within 24 hours, the New Media had shown that such was not the case, that the memos could not have been produced on any machine in the hands of the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam era. The New Media quickly demonstrated that the proportional spacing of the memo and the superscripting of dates were nearly impossible to create on 1970s technology and that the layout of the memo was unlike anything produced at the time. In short, they showed that the memo was not created on a Texas National Guard typewriter as CBS News had alleged, but was instead produced on a modern computer using Microsoft Word on its default settings and faxed or copied repeatedly to make it look old. They showed, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the memo was a fake.

As word of the fraud spread across the internet, additional data came to the fore, questioning the use of CBS news' acquisition and handling of the documents. Within a week, other major news organizations began reporting on the controversy, within two weeks, CBS itself reported that they had been misled by their source concerning the origin of the memo. Soon after, CBS brought in a former attorney general and a former president of the Associated Press to get to the bottom of the issue. The result was a shakeup of the entire CBS news structure.

Who was this "New Media" that was knowledgeable enough about such arcane topics as superscripting and National Guard memo layouts to shake up one of the biggest news outfits in the world in a matter of weeks? It was a network of independent bloggers who posted their findings in real time, shared information, and tested ideas. And their posts were followed closely by millions of readers, many of whom posted the findings on their own blogs for their own readers. As those readers shared the information with friends and colleagues, interest in the New Media, and the habit of readers looking for their news from independent sources, accelerated a climb that began when Matt Drudge reported rumors of what became the Monica Lewinski scandal several months before the Old Media whispered a word publicly about it.

What a Blog is (and is Not)

A good working definition of a blog is simply a journal or newsletter that is frequently updated and intended for the timely reading. It often provides opportunities for unfiltered

and immediate feedback, sports an informal or even partisan attitude, and is written in a more personal style than traditional press outlets.

Blogs come in all shapes and subjects, from the maunderings of troubled teen souls to displays of classical photography to breaking news and commentary. They can be online journals, locked with a password shared by a few trusted friends, or they can be page after page of source code, sharing useful and free computer programs with the world.   A blog may be an online journal tangential to a company's main business, where users of a company's products give feedback and ask for help. Blogs can be hosted by single individuals, shared by teams, or produced by entire companies. They may be hosted on a dedicated blog server using fancy templates or lovingly hand-crafted in HTML on a page that resembles a bulletin board.

But a blog is not simply a syndicated column or a newspaper that is online. Many news outlets feature their content online and even allow readers to respond to stories. However, the newspaper's business does not change just because it has a new medium. Editors and writers still do the same jobs they did before the advent of online distribution; the newspaper does not view itself as any different from what it always was.

And perhaps therein lies the difference: attitude. The newspaper sees itself as presenting all the news that's fit to print, written by objective professionals, while the blogger sees himself as presenting a piece of his own world and his own expertise from his own perspective. As blogs become more popular, more columnists are becoming

bloggers and more bloggers are becoming professional in what they write. Perhaps in a few years, the distinction between the Old Media and the New will be irrelevant in the mind of writers; for many readers today, it already is.

The number of individual blogs has topped 20 million and readership is exploding. In fact, the trade magazine [Ad Age](#) reports that during 2005 alone, American workers will spend the equivalent of 551,000 years reading blogs, rumor sheets, and online diaries. Hundreds of millions of readers worldwide get their news and entertainment from these independent sources, supporting their favorite bloggers through donations, link usage, and purchase of blog-related memorabilia.

The Blog as a Business

Most blogs are small potatoes. The vast majority are online journals where teenagers talk about their lives to a readership made up of their closest friends. A growing minority, however, are businesses in and of themselves. They balance costs and income; they purposely seek out content providers, advertisers, and paying customers. They make a profit. They are, in fact, Blog Empires, ruling over a reader-defined section of the blogosphere as the go-to site for millions who come to get the news, buy promotional merchandise, and donate money to keep their favorite bloggers fed and happy.

That's where you come in. You can draw millions of readers, because what you have to say is important. You can accumulate advertisers, because they will pay to reach your readers. In short, you can build your own Blog Empire, and it's easier than you think.

This book will walk you through the steps necessary to see your name in lights and your blog climb to the top of blog listings everywhere, and to fatten your bank account with the profits from your own blog business.

It will take a lot of work (what worthwhile thing doesn't?) but you may find that being a blogger, building a Blog Empire of your own, is the most fulfilling job you've ever had.

The Components of a Blog Empire

A Blog Empire, like any other business, is made up of three major components: a supplier, buyers, and the products for sale. But a blog in many cases differs from the average business because you are bringing together two sets of customers and delivering two sets of products. And you're not even selling the main item you produce.

Sound confusing? It's really not. Let's take a look at the component parts and illustrate just how simple it is.

The first component is a supplier. That's you. It is your words, your opinion, your research, and your art which can bring thousands or even millions of readers to your blog. You will be the attraction, the broker, and the Emperor of your Blog Empire. If it

weren't for you, the blog wouldn't exist. Because of who you are, what you know, and what you do, it can thrive.

The second component is a buyer, a customer. While the vast majority of your customers will be your readers, other customers will include companies that pay you to feature their links and advertisements on your blog. "Traffic" (those millions of readers out there who care about what you say) is the lifeline of your site: you've got to find them and bring them in. Once they are there, your advertising customers will pay for access to your reading customers, and your reading customers will pay for your information and merchandise.

The final component is a product. Like all businesses, yours can't exist without a product to sell. But what do you sell when you're giving your opinion away for free on a blog?

The first product you sell is yourself: your opinions and your expertise. Without selling yourself to your readers, you will have no customers. They may not always pay you directly (though we'll see that in many cases, they will) but if they don't buy what you're saying, they will not buy anything else.

The second product you sell is your space. You lease it to advertisers who will pay you to put information in front of your millions and millions of readers. Whether text links or

flashing popup banner ads, your advertisers will pay you for a small part of your readers' attention.

The final product you sell is your merchandise. With a properly-branded name and a reputation for excellence, your readers will purchase coffee mugs, t-shirts, bumper stickers…anything you can imagine.

In your Blog Empire, your reader is a customer and a product, and the more customers you have, the more products you can sell and the more profit you can pocket. You can turn your labor of love into a digital cash cow by building a Blog Empire that brings customers and buyers together. This book will show you how to do just that.

PART II: BUILDING YOUR BLOG EMPIRE

Deciding What Type of Empire You'll Build

So you want to build an empire. Unlike historical empires that relied on unique military tactics, advanced technology, and slave labor, your empire will rely on a single person: you. You'll design it, you'll build it, and you'll people it with readers who return to it day after day, becoming in a small sense virtual citizens of your Blog Empire and eventually your happy customers. You'll use the same tactics as others, but you'll use them more efficiently. You'll use the same infrastructure as others, but you'll use it more effectively. You'll compete with other empires for your readers' time, and you'll do so successfully. A Blog Empire is an empire of customer service and you will not only be its ruler, you will be the servant of all who enter it. Sound like fun? It can be, if you design your empire with one person in mind: you.

It seems a dichotomy to say that a Blog Empire should be built around the provider rather than the customer, but there's a simple reason for it: it will be you who updates it day after day. You will be the editor, the designer, and the main focus of the site. Your expertise, your hobby, or your insight will provide the service that the citizens of your Blog Empire want. You can't sell from an empty cart and you've got to be in it for the long haul. That means you've got to provide content that features what you know and what you love. You will be the key, and every part of your Blog Empire will be designed with that in mind.

However, before you can lay the foundations, we need to review a few options. Let's take a look at a few successful blogs and generate some ideas. Then we'll come back for a good look at the one who can make it all work: you.

The Makings of Empire: Choosing Content That Provides Value

Unless you are a successful newspaper columnist or a famous actress who is able to draw hordes of readers by your reputation alone, your blog is going to need a theme. It may be a narrow one, like "Libertarian politics in the Massachusetts Governor's race." It may be a broad one, like, "art focusing on life and love." But whatever your theme, your blog is going to keep readers by presenting them with the valuable content they expect. Not coincidentally, it's also going to be a theme you love and will not be tempted to stray far from.

Because there are literally millions of blogs available, successful blogs reach one kind of reader, and they do it well. The reason is obvious: a reader who might share your interest in model trains may not share your love of fine wines. He may not care about your vacation in Paris. Unless he's a personal friend, he may not care about your new car. That means you're going to have to pick a subject and stick with it. A good starting place is the following list of popular blog categories: political, spiritual, society/culture, rant, business, hobby, technology, art, news, reference.

Of the most popular blogs, measured by Technorati.com, a popular blog search engine, a significant percentage are political blogs. This should not be surprising: with the

exception of religious opinions, opinions on politics are some of the most fiercely held and vociferously debated. Political opinions make great blog fodder. But there's a catch: everyone has an opinion, but not everyone has one that millions of readers will take time to read. Successful political blogs, whether the liberal Daily Kos, the conservative Red State, or the law-oriented Volokh Conspiracy, all have one thing in common: they have important and timely information (not just opinions) that can be relied upon by serious political junkies. They have high-level political connections, access to rumors, or expertise to share. If you are connected in politics or law and have serious light to shed on the issues of the day, a political blog may be your Blog Empire. The same case holds for spiritual blogs, hobby blogs, and technology blogs: the successful blogs are those run by experts (that is, of course, why we're going to build your empire on your own expertise) who can tell readers what they don't know and want to know.

There are, however, successful blogs that are not run by experts; they are run, in fact, by someone who had a brilliant idea. As of this writing, the third most popular blog on Technorati, linked by more than 25,000 other blogs, is Post Secret. On Post Secret, the readers do all the work, creating a picture that represents a secret the contributor wants to anonymously reveal to the world. The secrets may be "I once made a student repeat a grade so I could flirt with his father for another year," or it may be "I find it amusing when my blind dog crashes into furniture." In every case, the entries chosen are skillfully presented (the blogger IS an expert in picking interesting content) and readers laugh, they cry, and they relate. But most importantly, they return again and again.

Post Secret illustrates that all you need is a well-presented good idea to build a blog empire.

News, link, and reference blogs require an abiding interest in one subject and the tenacity to find relevant, timely information. Successful ones cover their subject so well that they are considered valuable references by serious news hounds. A good example of this type of blog is Zero Intelligence. Zero Intelligence gathers every relevant story about "zero tolerance" drug and weapons policies in public and private schools and presents them with commentary. It follows stories through the press cycle to resolution or disappearance and serves as a trusted clearing house for relevant information. Another reference blog is "Literally, a Weblog," which documents the popular press' misuse of the word "literally." If a writer needs an example to make a point about the use or misuse of "literally" in the arts or media, "Literally, a Weblog" can provide a fitting example for any story.

No idea is too small, too silly, or too pretentious so long as you present your content in a manner that makes your blog a valuable reference. If you have an abiding interest in a specific subject more than any other, then a news, link, or reference blog may be may be the place to start.

The final category is, alas, the largest category of blogs and the one that makes up the smallest percentage of professional blogs: the rant blog. Rant blogs are generally "brain dump" blogs, where the blogger simply writes what's on her mind, tells about her

day, or whines about her boss. It is a cathartic project, designed for the blogger's

mental health, and while it may be interesting – at least to the author - it will seldom

draw much of a crowd. Unless your life is interesting enough to write a book about, the

rant blog is to be avoided. If your life IS interesting enough to write a book about, it's

probably best to write the book.

Construction: No one Need Blog Alone

If the idea of sifting the news 20 hours a day for blog material gives you the willies, don't

panic: get a partner. One of the most popular blog formats (or rather, the format of

many popular blogs) is the multi-contributor blog. I mentioned the Volokh Conspiracy

earlier; it's written by several legal experts who contribute in their areas of expertise to

the blog's main theme. National Review's "Corner" follows a similar format: NR's

columnists answer reader mail and contribute quips and opinions, making the page a

lively read. Creating a multi-contributor blog means that you'll be sharing your Blog

Empire with co-regents, and as history illustrates, this has challenges of its own. But if

you share a love of your subject with other experts, you'll be doing your readers a favor

by sharing divergent opinions with them.

A second possibility is to join a site that has multiple blogs on it, drawing traffic that may

come to read others and stay to read you. A number of newspapers like the Lawrence

Journal World feature a stable of bloggers on their site and may even feature some of

their bloggers in print or on their paper's front page online. For the blogger who wants

to build an audience quickly, this may be an option. Be aware, however, that writing

under someone else's banner means you will be giving up significant creative control: it may be a good starting place for you to build a name, but you'll soon want to strike out on your own.

Well, What Do You Know?

Now that you know what you can build, let's take a look at what you want to build. The first step in that process is looking at who you are, what and who you know, and what you love. What do you have to offer the millions of potential readers who will join your Blog Empire while they sip their morning coffee?
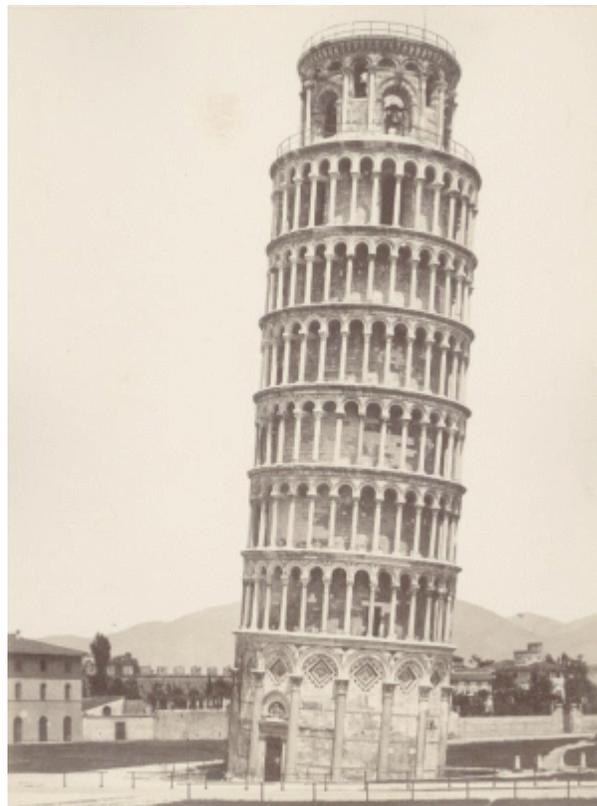

Figure 1 - Establishing a firm foundation is essential

To find out we're going to answer the most important question for your future success: where you're going to build your capitol, the headquarters of your own Blog Empire. Basically, we're going to brainstorm and free associate. There are no right answers, no wrong answers, and nothing is too crazy to write down at this point. Remember, if you love it, someone else probably loves it, too.

Take out a blank sheet of paper and get a nice, tall drink. Then answer the following questions as best as you can. Some, like your age, may seem silly or irrelevant. Some you may simply not have an answer to. That's perfectly all right. Just be as thorough as you can.

Question 1: Who are you? What is your age? What is your gender? What is your race? Are you religious? Are you a dazzling urbanite, a laid-back rural, or something in between? Do you think about these issues every day? Do they matter to you or to your friends? HOW do they matter? What languages do you speak? If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be? Try that last one again, honestly this time.

Question 2: What do you know? What and who do you know? Where have you gone to school? Where do you work and what do you do? In what areas are you an expert? Who else shares your love, your passion, your expertise? What work, education, or hobby-related areas could you be said to have a reputation? What do you have a reputation for?

Question 3: What do you want to know? When you log onto the internet, where is the first place you go? What are you looking for? What do you expect to find? How long does it take you to find it? Is everything in one place? How many sites do you visit before you're satisfied? What do you WANT a reputation for?

Question 4: What are you passionate about? What makes your blood boil? What makes you jump up and click your heels? Have you ever written a letter to the editor? What was the subject? Did you check the paper every day for responses? What politicians or issues do you love enough to walk door-to-door for? Why? If you were king, what would be the first thing you'd do? If you won the lottery, what would be the first thing you'd buy?

Assess your skills and knowledge:

Next, we're going to examine some skills that are necessary in order to create certain types of blogs. Be as honest (even as harsh) as you can in your self-appraisal. Remember, if you really can't write well, your readers are going to know. If you can create first-rate artwork, now is not the time to sell yourself short.

I can write: very well / pretty well / are you kidding?

My writing has been published by others: Y / N

My sense of humor can be described as: dry / sarcastic / ironic / witty / are you kidding?

I can write well in the following languages: _____

I can program computers using the following languages: _____

I have written computer programs that are in use by others Y / N

I can create professional quality artwork: Y / N

I have used the following graphics packages: _____

I have taken the following arts or graphics classes: _____

My artwork is currently being used by others Y / N

Extra Credit:

I'm consistently surprised that people ask my opinion about: _____

I have a million stories about: _____

I know more than anyone else about: _____

People would pay for my knowledge about: _____

Now, look over all your answers and pick the category where most of them fit best:

__Artistic __Business __Hobby __News __Political __Rant __Reference

__Society/Culture __Spiritual __Other:_____

For example, if you are passionate about technology and know more than anyone else about RS-232 serial interfaces, then a technology blog may be the beginning of your Blog Empire. If you are fanatical about gun rights or racism or personal privacy, but can't write, then a news or reference blog may be right up your alley.

If your skills overlap multiple categories, that's ok as well. You may be able to create a category that no one else has tried! But pick your category carefully: the success of

your blog empire is going to depend on whether you can consistently offer your readers the content that they will return again and again for. Your mental health will depend upon whether you love it enough to stay the course.

Develop a Blog Theme

Every successful blog has a theme - the idea or subject your blog is about more than anything else - that makes it a go-to site in the minds of readers. In order to make your blog a success you must be able to contribute something unique, and that something is going to make up the theme of your blog. It might be a comical take on the news. It might be in-depth tutorials for a certain software package. It might even be rumors you hear in your daily job as a top-level political analyst. It may be short stories or fascinating photographs. But you have to find that certain something that only you can contribute and that people want to read or see.

Your blog's theme can be summed up by what you want you blog to be famous for, the one unique thing your blog presents or contributes. Pick three or four key words that describe your content and your presentation of it, based on your skills, abilities, and knowledge (e.g. "satirical partisan political commentary" or "sentimental love poetry"). Then complete your theme:

Blog Theme: My blog is known and respected as the best place on the internet to find: _____ _____ _____ _____

Figure 2 - A Blog Empire has many subjects but only one theme

Branding – Developing a Name and Image That Will Stick With People

Every empire has a name. It may be regal enough that "Rome" says everything there is to say. It may try to ride off the success of others, as the "Holy Roman Empire" attempted in the Ninth Century. Whatever name you choose, however, will establish your brand. It will be the name that people remember, and it will be with you forever.

Think it's not important? Just imagine what would happen to Coca-Cola if its name was changed tomorrow to Sparkie's Soda. Would you still buy it even if it tasted the same?

Would they still be the most popular cola in the world? Their name, built carefully for more than a century, is the most valuable asset they own. Your brand will do the same for your Blog Empire.

Need Brand Be Relevant to Content?

The question immediately arises whether your name needs to be descriptive of your content, and the answer is, unfortunately, "maybe." Sometimes it helps, as no one going to Red State would expect anything other than GOP-friendly commentary. The [Anti-Idiotarian Rottweiler](#) is descriptive of both commentary and style. [Post Secret](#) says everything there is to say about the blog.

On the other hand, many successful blogs have names that are simply memorable. [Little Green Footballs](#), with more than 100,000 visitors a day, is a political blog concerned with the War on Terror. [BoingBoing](#) describes itself as "a directory of wonderful things." Both have memorable names; neither has a meaningful one.

Branding Idea Generator

In order to come up with a few brand ideas to choose from, we're going to perform a little brainstorming session. It will involve picking words that relate to you and your content or your interests, and matching them with other words. As an idea generator it will be worthwhile even if you have a name and image picked out. After all, almost any idea can be improved, but if yours is already the best, this little exercise should prove that, too.

Repeat your theme here:

Blog Theme: My blog is known and respected as the best place on the internet to find: _____ _____ _____ _____

Now, take a look at your key, content-related words and write them here:

1)

2)

3)

4)

Write your personal nicknames (if applicable) or a couple words that describe you here:

1)

2)

3)

Write five words or the names of particular objects or subjects you enjoy writing, researching, or talking about here (they need not be related to your theme):

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

Now, go online to dictionary.com and look each up in the thesaurus, picking out unique synonyms or words you like the sound of. Write them on a separate sheet of paper (you should end up with at least 30 words).

For each of those words, write two words that are related, like "captain – ship, quarters" or "car – hot rod, spinning wheels." Try not to be too obvious.

That's a lot of words, some of which will be related to your content, and some not. Now, just play with them and combine them however you like, noting those combinations which sound powerful or – even better – interesting. Change a few words to interesting but similar words (e.g. "pillar" to "pillage"). Write down a few phrases (even clichés) that the words appear in. Just have fun with them!

Then grab a half dozen of your favorites and just let them stew in your mind. By the time you're through with this book, you'll know which one you like best or whether you need to start the exercise over, and you may even have dreamed up matching artwork for a few of them.

Earning and Protecting Your Reputation

Whether or not your brand is relevant to your content, it will quickly develop one relevant attribute: a reputation. Everyone who reads your blog will come away with an impression, either good or bad. They will like it or not. Surprisingly, that's not the most important issue for your Blog Empire, because no reader, not even your most loyal, is

going to like or agree with everything you say. The important issue is whether that reader believes your blog to be important. If a reader does not find a blog important, she will probably not return even if she liked a story or two: there are simply too many other blogs to see. If a reader finds your blog insightful, entertaining, and relevant, she will return even though she disagrees with your commentary or doesn't like your layout. In order to be a serious empire, your blog must exude seriousness. That doesn't mean your subject must be serious, but you must be serious about your subject.

For political and technology blogs, that means accuracy and timeliness. Rumors must be noted as such. Opinions must be noted as such. You can be a partisan – in fact, your theme may be a very partisan view of something - but you've got to be fair to your readers, who will form an opinion about your subject based on what you say. If your blog is an art blog, you've got to focus on quality. If your blog features model trains, entries about your daughter's dance recital will lose readers. If your blog is a reference or news blog, you've got to be thorough. Once your reputation is established, readers will come to your blog to see what you have to say because they will expect you to know more than them. If you miss the big story or are shown by later events to be completely off-the-wall when you said you were certain, they may not return.

Reputation is everything, so as you build your Blog Empire, remember what you want a reputation for and consistently strive to earn it.

Figure 3 - Reputation is Everything

Designing a Page That Complements Your Content

Many of us dream of going boldly where no man has gone before. In the blog world, that's done with content – creating a unique contribution to the blogosphere that readers will return to again and again.

In some areas, however, it's safer to follow the well-worn path, sort of like following the Oregon Trail across the Old American West. Someone found the best way to cross the plains and many others succeeded only because they followed in those muddy ruts.

The hard work was done, and the important stuff lay on the other side of the mountains. It would have been foolish for a greenhorn to try to seek a new pass through the mountains simply because others had already established one. So it is with developing the look of your blog, at least when you are getting started. Of course, once you are a seasoned explorer, you'll want to seek out the newer and better paths that others overlook.

Earlier you chose the kind of Blog Empire you were going to establish, so now it's time to take a look at a few other blogs that have successfully made the trek you're setting out on. We're only going to look at the best (i.e. most successful) blogs to start with, though you'll eventually want to follow a few blog rings to snatch up ideas that can help you build your site into all it can be.

If you haven't already done so, do a web search using you favorite search engine, looking for the Top 100 blogs. It doesn't really matter how you search, just that you find blogs that have proven themselves in the eyes of readers and other bloggers, because there are many ways to measure the top: by traffic, by number of other blogs that link, even by awards. You'll eventually want to search them all.

Now take a look at their layouts, their colors, their images. Focus especially on blogs that resemble yours in content. How do they deal with long posts? How do they link documents? Do they have a list of previous entries? What does their masthead look like? How many columns do they have across the page, including links? These

questions are important, not because you'll be copying (you won't), but because there are certain layout standards your readers will expect to see, just like you expect that all daily newspapers will share a similar format.

Artwork

As much as your blog resembles others, there are ways in which your blog will be – must be – unique. The first is, obviously, your title. The second is going to be artwork that complements it. On a blog titled, "The Privateer," a ship would be a complementary masthead. A German shepherd dog would not. But whether your title is relevant to your content, your artwork should be relevant to your title if possible. The image and title are part of your brand, the image you want your readers to remember and come back for more of. They should send a single message to your reader at first glance.

That means professional quality artwork. It does not have to be professionally created, but it must be of high quality. Create it yourself only if you're good enough at it that people would pay you to do theirs.

A couple of examples from political sites will illustrate:

Power Line has its name, literally in lights, with lightning striking from each end. Could it be any more powerful?

Red State shows a map of the United States with red from sea to shining sea. It's not only their masthead, but their goal.

Daily Kos goes for a more artistic look, with an orange-and-black picture background and the name in bold white. The picture need not relate directly to the title because the title is a personal name, but it must (and does) look professional.

What they have in common is professionalism and uniqueness. Your Blog Empire should exude the same professional seriousness as the best blogs. After all, you'll be joining them!

Figure 4 - A blog's header art illustrates the theme

Fonts and Colors

Blogs come in all fonts and colors, and there is no right way to handle them except that they ought to say something about your site whenever possible. Red State, for obvious reasons, goes heavy on the red and light on the blue. [Gizmodo](), a blog dedicated to gadgets, uses a more "techno" color scheme, with soft blues and oranges. [Daring Fireball]() does the opposite of what you'd expect: there's not an orange letter on the page; just unadventurous shades of gray. Each of them has a consistent scheme that makes it stand out from others, even while respecting the layout standards readers expect.

Less can be said on fonts, as most blogs use the popular fonts that come with blog software. The only warnings are to be sure your font is of a readable size for most screens (from 800x600 to 1024x768), and to avoid using comical or whimsical fonts on serious material. It's also a good idea to stick with fonts that most people will have on their machines, because most browsers will default to a popular font anyway if they don't have yours installed. Unless there's a good reason not to, you should stick with a font that will not detract attention from your message. That normally means Arial, Times New Roman, Georgia, or the like.

Using Your Links Wisely

The vast majority of blogs feature a section or two that contains nothing but links. They may be links to the bloggers' other blogs or to related sites; they may even be links to every syndicated columnist online - such a scheme makes up a good portion of the

[Drudge Report](#), Matt Drudge's headline news portal. If you feature links, you'll be following the grand tradition of successful bloggers and doing your readers a service. We'll talk later about using your links as an assets to increase traffic, but for now we'll just talk about how they are laid out, and in layout, there are two rules to follow: use your links purposely and organize them effectively.

Everything on your page should contribute to your page, and your links are no exception. They should be organized in a manner that helps your readers navigate them, whether alphabetically or by subject. They should also each contribute something to your blog's content. Aunt Mabel's cat blog may be really nice – and you may really love your aunt - but the readers of your open-source software blog will not be terribly interested in it. Your links are an asset: distribute them in a way that maximizes your blog's value, and organize them in a way that ensures your readers can find what they want.

Layout

Fonts, colors, links and artwork are all produced on the page in a layout, a format which ought to resemble the newly-cleaned bedroom of a small child. There will be a place for everything and everything will be in its place. There will be no toys shoved under the bed where a curious grandmother will find them and tut-tut. The closets will be neat and well-organized. The floor will be swept. In other words, you'll need to combine all the elements of your blog into a format that makes people feel relaxed and impressed rather than distracted by clutter. But how do you accomplish that if you have no artistic ability? It's not as hard as you would expect.

Most blog software comes with a series of templates, preformatted layouts that will put things where your readers expect them to be. These templates will allow you to set fonts and colors, decide if you want one gutter or several, and place your own artwork on the page. They will allow you to set up an archive, start a mailing list so your subscribers can be notified every time you post, and provide a standardized structure into which you can add the codes and features that will make your blog unique. Just remember that every blog host and package offers different features (some are simple but don't allow imported art, some require HTML knowledge but offer great latitude in design). If you don't want to design the page yourself, professional blog designers, like Hoyt Station, can create an inexpensive layout to your specifications.

Objects

Objects are small pieces of code that will be added to your site to make it unique and to provide useful content for your readers outside of your own writing. They can be as simple as a page counter or as complicated as an online poll or a RSS feed, but all will be laid out on your page with two ideas in mind: visual harmony and usefulness.

Your page, when viewed for the first time, should speak most loudly to your theme. Whether your theme is artistic or political or technological, every object on the page should do its best to illustrate and reinforce that theme in the mind of the reader.

Some objects, however, will not relate directly to your theme as much as they will to the operation of your site. A traffic counter is a perfect example. While bloggers are excited when their traffic grows and want to tell the world about it in capital letters and bold fonts, most readers are not terribly interested. Therefore it's good practice to feature objects that directly relate to your theme and content close to the top of your page where the reader will see it first. Operational or structural objects, like a list of blogs that have sent you recent traffic, belong closer to the bottom of the page.

Remember, your objective is to catch the first time reader's attention and to illustrate, in as little time as possible, the theme of your site. Every object on your page should be placed with that in mind.

Blog Entries

What stories are to a city newspaper, blog entries are to your Blog Empire. And while your layout is important, readers will not return again and again to admire your layout or ruminate over your clever title. They'll return again and again to read your writing or view your artwork or check the links that you provide. In other words, while they may read because of your layout, they will return because of your entries.

An entry is simply a published piece of material, and your readers will have definite expectations for your entries that you will need to meet, again and again, in order to woo them into coming back tomorrow. Luckily, most of those expectations are set by

you in prior entries. Those expectations are insight, relevance, timeliness, accuracy, and consistency.

Insightful and Unique Content

Whether your blog provides photographs of the rain forest, reviews of Pacific Northwest restaurants, or the largest collection of ethnic jokes on the planet, your readers expect that every time they come there, they'll find something new, unique, and worthwhile. They'll expect to find something they can't find anywhere else or find by themselves without searching all over. In short, they'll expect you to provide insightful and unique content on a certain consistent subject or issue. Your insight and your dedication to providing quality are what will draw them back.

Links and Commentary

On a news blog, for example, your readers expect that your commentary will provide interesting and relevant news, probably with a link to an original story or a source site. They will also expect you to provide expertise that they do not possess, information they have not found elsewhere, and an up-to–the-minute take on relevant trends and rumors. They want to read the entry and come away feeling they now know more than they did, that they learned something interesting, and that they leave with a reason to return.

A blog that reviews restaurants will meet those same expectations in a different manner. Timeliness is less a factor – restaurants don't change as quickly as the daily news – but

relevance and thoroughness become more important. Your readers are not going to return for your reviews of Portland's collection of Subway restaurants, nor for your fifth review of Kell's Irish Pub, even if you think it the best place in the world to eat. They demand an expanding collection of useful content, and they want each entry to tell them everything they need to know to make an enjoyable dining decision. They want you to be clear, honest, and thorough.

Perhaps your blog is a reference blog, collecting and publishing links by subject. While readers may not have expectations for your commentary, they will expect the links to be accurate and present a thorough overview of the subject from all angles – or at least from the angle your readers have come to expect from prior commentary. Consistency and thoroughness are again the watchwords.

Whatever the theme of your blog, your readers will expect every entry to be timely, relevant, and accurate.

Consistency

Because your blog shares many attributes of your local newspaper, think for a moment about what the newspaper look like. It has a masthead, headings, and stories. It has a certain number of columns, fonts of a certain size and type, and stories categorized within sections. It looks that way every day. It is consistent.

On the other hand, imagine what you'd think of a newspaper that placed random obituaries in the sports section, put the top story of the day in the classifieds section, or used random fonts and character sizes across an ever-changing number of columns. You wouldn't have a lot of respect for that newspaper, would you? It would not be taken seriously by most readers. They would ignore it, even though it may be incredibly informative and insightful once they get past the layout. They will ignore your blog, too, unless you learn a lesson from the papers: consistency makes a good first impression.

That means your entries have to look smart and interesting, even before the reader scans a single headline. And your entries must be readable, especially if you are quoting a source and explaining or arguing with that source. This can be done through the use of bolds, indentations, color (either font or background) or as many ways as you can imagine. The only limitations are your imagination and a respect for consistency. What works for one entry should be made to work for all. If a specific layout does not work for most entries, keep experimenting until you find one that does. Your readers will appreciate it.

Your blog entries, laying one after the other on a page, will present the same visual opportunity to make a first impression as the consistent fonts and columns of a newspaper. That means your entries should all look similar. They should have the same font in the same size. The headlines and links should be treated the same way all down the page. If you use images, they should appear in the same place in each entry. The entries, at least on the front page, should be the same size, with no entry so large

that it takes up the whole front page unless that's the only story you're doing for the day – and you do it every day.

But how do you do that, since you'll not have the same amount to say about every subject or the same number of images to present? Extra commentary should be handled, like newspapers do it, "behind the fold."

Take a look at a few of the favorite blogs you chose earlier and notice a linked line at the bottom of many stories. It may say, "More behind the fold" or simply, "Read more." Notice how each of the entries looks the same, with no long entries taking up the entire page. Notice how if a story does not interest you (and not every one will) you can see the next story without paging down. That blog realizes that if a long story does not interest a reader, she will most likely not skip to the next one unless she can see it; she will likely surf away instead. If it does interest the reader, the rest of the story is only a click away.

Whatever blog software you choose (and we'll review a few types later) should allow you to put data behind the fold, saving your front page for multiple stories, just like a newspaper does. Remember, the New Media will take the best from the Old Media, and a consistent and serious presentation is one of the best lessons you can learn from them.

Copyright

You'll take a lot more from the Old Media than just lessons on consistency, however. If you have a news blog, you'll take parts of stories that will set up your own commentary. A technology blog may quote articles and experts speaking in interviews you did not give. In other words, unless you'll be presenting completely original work on your blog, you'll have to deal with basic issues of copyright. This book is not a legal guide, and we recommend you familiarize yourself with the basic issues of copyright before you copy another's material - there are some very good blogs which cover the issue – but there are a few principles that can help you lay the foundations of a safe and legal Blog Empire.

The first issue is attribution. The blog owner must always attribute the work of others to them and not to himself, even by default. That means interviews, passages, and photographs found online are the property of others and their rights should be respected. If you quote a passage of text, make sure you tell whence it originated (either through a link or a description) and be sure not to claim it for your own.

The second issue is "fair use." Americans may copy and distribute the work of others under the doctrine of "fair use" under certain legally-defined terms. This generally includes short passages, and certainly includes passages that the user is commenting on. For news and technology blogs, copyright is not as much of an issue as for other blogs.

However, if your blog is an art blog, these issues become complex enough that seeking competent legal counsel is a must. Copyright law does not allow you to distribute, for example, .MP3 files from your favorite bands or the photography of your favorite artist just because you have the technical know-how to copy and upload them.

Also remember that copyright laws and issue differ from nation to nation. Many people believe that they can get away with infringing the intellectual and artistic rights of others because the web is international. However, as your blog is meant to been viewed by millions, you should respect copyright and work within your nation's applicable laws if for no other reason than that your reputation as an honest business will depend upon it.

Are Images Necessary?

When designing a blog or blog entry, one of the immediate questions that will arise is whether it will demand a picture or image to give it "life" or "zest." If your blog is an art blog that will feature visual presentations, the answer is obviously in the affirmative. But what if your blog is a political or technology blog? If your blog's content is mostly information rather than visual art, an image can occasionally help get your message across, especially if it helps to illustrate your content.

In that case, an image, which will necessarily be small in order to fit on your page, can be hyperlinked to a larger version in order to give your readers access to more information or detail should they desire it. In this case, it's helpful to have the image open a separate browser so the original story remains in the main browser.

Images, like your entries themselves, should be consistently sized. They do not have to be exactly the same, however, because not every image will be the same shape and should not be forced into an arbitrary mold, especially at the expense of proportion. A skewed image is generally worse than none. However, it is important to avoid haphazard sizing, especially when you feature multiple images close together. Images of vastly differing sizes will scream 'unprofessional' at your readers.

Successful bloggers will occasionally use humorous or "cute" pictures to illustrate content or to make a point. This is acceptable so long as it is used only occasionally and does not detract from the image you're trying to create for your blog. It also provides a nice break for your readers if your content has been heavy, repetitive, or intense. They deserve a break just like you do.

A look at the successful political blogs, for example, will illustrate the acceptable use of images in blogs that seek to be taken seriously. When introducing someone (e.g. a new musician or an obscure, state-level politician) to your readers, a small photograph is helpful, as it is in the newspaper, to give them a visual reference point. When discussing documents, it's helpful to present a copy of the document, either hyperlinked (.PDF files are best for this) or as a small .JPG or .GIF image. Making your own illustrative notations on the images where appropriate (so long as they are done in a professional manner) will help to make your content even more original.

However, unless your blog is a humor blog, overuse of humorous or 'cute' pictures can damage your blog's reputation. Because you seek to be serious and taken seriously by your readers, it's important to design every entry in a way that supports and furthers your reputation.

Of course, if your blog is dedicated to holidays or cheerleaders, then by all means, load it up with as many pictures as will fit on the page!

Hosting Images

When a small-time blogger or diarist finds an image that looks like it might fit his post, he's likely as not to simply link the picture where it exists, leaving it on someone else's server, but displaying it on his page like it's his own. For those who are not taking credit for the work, or whose blogs are not "professional," it's generally a non-issue. However, occasionally an image will appear on their site which is not the image they displayed, but which instead informs all their readers of what they are doing. It will say, in obnoxiously large letters that can't be missed by the reader, "This person is stealing bandwidth." It's not a reputation you want your blog to have, and many sites are creating technological locks that that display such warnings or keep people from doing it altogether.

Stealing bandwidth is, in short, linking directly to another's site in a way that causes the reader's browser to download others' content as part of your page. When a browser asks a server for a web page, the page points to the locations of other components of

that page so that the browser can assemble it for viewing. If every word and image your page displays is stored on your server, then the bandwidth used for that page load is charged against your account. That's fine; it's your traffic and you should pay for it. However, if some of those components are hosted on the servers of others, your bandwidth is charged against their account. Once your traffic starts to grow, they will notice your theft and will be rightly upset with your practices. The solution is to take responsibility for your own bandwidth by hosting your own images.

In addition to being honest business, hosting your own images allows you to re-size or reformat those images to fit your page. While many blog programs allow you to do that when setting up the entry, unless you have physically re-sized the photo or image, the browser will be forced to download it in its original size and then fit it to the page. This can cause slow loading times, which are to be avoided at all costs.

The final advantage of hosting your own images is that you know they'll always be there. As your blog grows in popularity and your archives spider their way into search engines, people will visit your prior entries as an entry point into your blog. Those entries will also be linked to and commented on by others (remember, what you're saying is important). Ensuring that the images in your entries are under your control will eliminate the possibility that others will move or delete the images, rendering your entries less useful. Of course, be sure to respect all copyright laws when copying or modifying the work of others.

The easiest way to host your own images is to simply lease space from an internet service provider, uploading the images as you place them in entries. Check with your current provider first: you may receive a significant amount of server space assigned with your regular internet account. If you decide to lease space (and you'll probably need to as your blog grows) be sure that the amount you have will fit the growth you plan for your business.

Archives

Your blog will feature at most a dozen articles on your front page, and when users pay you a visit, that's all they'll see. But once you've been blogging for a few days, you'll have written posts that begin to scroll off the page to be lost to your readers and history. Or are they? They're not lost if you have an easily-accessible archive.

Figure 5 - Archives can be organized via a calendar object

An archive is simply a collection of posts that are no longer displayed on your main page. When someone comes to your blog, they are generally greeted by a page with the name "index.html" or something similar. The index page displays the content of some of your recent posts, but each of those posts also has an individual name. When those posts are archived, they are available through search engines – either on your site or across the web – so readers can find what you've written or presented in the

past. As your collection of posts grows, you'll need to ensure that your readers have a way to easily find those prior posts, either through a search box on your site or through an object that allows the reader to browse either by subject or by date.

With your information and pictures archived, your site will be well on its way to being the kind of reference that people will read, not only to find out what you're saying today, but to search out information you've shared since the first day you began your Blog Empire.

A Sample Blog Entry

Every blog entry you make will share certain characteristics, the first of which is a title, which should be descriptive of your content and should help to visually separate items on your page.

A blog entry will probably contain links to other content. Separate links from the rest of the text by color, so your readers can find them easily.

Text, of course, should not vary by size or font within an entry unless for a very good reason, like to separate an image description from the main text.

Working conditions were often harsh for laborers.

If your entries contain images, they should be consistently sized and consistently placed. Well-chosen images can illustrate your content and give your blog a sharp look.

Add plenty of yourself to each blog entry. Remember, your readers are coming to your Blog Empire to see what only you can present.

Link to this post :: Comment (0)

Figure 6 - A Sample Blog Entry

Becoming a Relevant Portal

It bears repeating that a primary strategy of your blog is to generate traffic. It's to provide information and services for your readers and to provide readers for your advertisers. That is accomplished, not by fancy tricks to draw new readers, but by creating a reputation as a portal, a clearing house if you will, for a certain kind of content. Every potential entry must be checked against your blog's theme to ensure that it advances that theme. When it does, your blog will become a portal for those looking for the kind of information you provide.

A portal is a site that leads to other sites and to other relevant information. In the blogosphere, a portal is a blog that can be counted on – and is counted on by millions of faithful readers – to have all the news that's fit to read about a certain subject. When that subject is hot, your readers know where to go to find information. When a reader is researching that subject or looking for relevant quotes and data, she knows that your site has it archived.

With your site as a portal, your readers – and the other bloggers that link to you – will know that they can find what they need by visiting you again and again. That's what traffic is, and traffic is the reason for every entry you make.

Blog Hosts

Every blog 'exists' somewhere. It may be on a server dedicated to nothing but blogs or it may be on privately-leased space a half a world away from the blogger. But in either case, the blogger needs to create his Blog Empire somewhere, and that somewhere will have implications for your blog as it grows into a household name.

Free vs. Subscription

With the popularity of blogs exploding, a large number of blog-specific servers and companies have arisen to meet the demand for fast and easy blog creation. Many of them provide software that allows the blogger to quickly and easily set up a blog, sometimes in mere minutes. They allow certain modification (colors, columns, etc.) and provide tools that can have your blog looking sharp, even if you've never typed an entry in your life.

But they have drawbacks as well, especially for blogs that want to more than just an online diary. They may not provide statistics. They may not allow you to host your own ads. They may even drop your entries once those entries roll off the front page. The solution, in many cases, is to pay a subscription fee which will free up features you need to make your blog profitable, unique, and professional.

Here's a list of some of the more popular blog-specific sites:

Blog-City: One of the easier blog-specific sites to use, Blog-City offers a wide number of pre-made layouts that do not require HTML knowledge to use. Functionality is limited, however, and some features are only available to those who pay an annual subscription fee.

Blog Drive: Blogdrive offers free blogging with objects such as tagboards, RSS feeds, and ready-made header graphics.

Blogspot: Blogspot features free blogging and image hosting, and provides a very user-friendly interface. Those who understand HTML will be able to create nearly any layout they desire.

TBlog: offers free "basic" service which must be upgraded to add features like comment management and image support.

Xanga: is dedicated toward the "online diary" end of the blogosphere. It offers free but limited image hosting and WYSIWYG editing, but downloadable archives are only available by purchasing a premium subscription.

Each host – and there are many others - has many unique attributes and prices, and before you decide to use one of them, it's wise to become familiar with what each offers. By the time you've finished this book, you're going to know precisely what features you

need to build your Blog Empire. So review each host carefully; if it turns out they don't offer what you need, it's often difficult to take your traffic with you when you move.

If you choose a free host, one of the first issues you'll deal with is the blog's URL. If you choose Blogspot, for example, your URL will look something like "elborak.blogspot.com" with "elborak" being your blog's name. That name must be unique across the host, and with millions of blogs out there, that's not an easy task. And if your blog is named, "Spackle News," it's going to be harder for readers to find your blog at "spacklenews.blogspot.com" than if the name is "SpackleNews.com." Fortunately, there are a few solutions to that problem.

The first solution is to use a forwarding service, like My Domain. You buy a fitting domain name for a few dollars a year, and My Domain will forward your traffic from SpackleNews.com (or whatever your blog name is) to your blog. You can even decide to view your blog within a frame, so the URL appears as SpackleNews.com, while the browser is pulling data from another server. Frames do have the problem, however, of "holding" any document you link to within that same frame unless you do some fancy coding. That makes it harder for the user to escape or find specific data on your blog, a situation which neither of you will appreciate.

A second solution is to choose a host that will allow you to directly assign a URL to your blog even as it remains on their server. Be sure to check the features of any blog host you examine to see if they offer the ability to assign your own URL.

A final solution is to simply rent normal web space and install a software package that will manage your blog. Depending upon the features you want, it may cost you a few dollars, but the features you get will usually exceed those of free or dedicated blog services by a long shot.

Here are a few of the popular packages and what they can provide:

Greymatter: Open-source and full-featured, Greymatter is a good choice for those who have some familiarity with CGI files and layouts. Free.

MacJournal: MacJournal is the leading journaling software for MacIntosh users who blog. It includes a full suite of Mac-specific features and offers the ability to manage multiple journals. Free.

Pico: While not as full-featured as some other packages, Pico is small and fast. Written entirely in Perl, it weighs in at a svelte 14k of disk space. It's easy to install and it's free.

Rocketpost: Published by Anconia Software, RocketPost is a full-featured package designed for business users and serious bloggers. It comes with a 30-day free trial and a $37 total cost.

All of these packages are available in either demo or full version at CNET's

Download.com.

Generating Traffic

The life of a blog is traffic, the visitors who visit your blog day after day, sometimes even multiple times throughout the day. With millions of blogs online, the greatest challenge in generating traffic is, well, generating traffic: getting those blog visitors to find your valuable and insightful content in the first place. There are a number of ways to quickly and easily generate a lot of traffic to your blog, but all traffic is not created equal – some traffic is worth less and some is just worthless. A thorough traffic-generating campaign will ensure the first visitors see your blog and spend some time there. But remember, it's your content that will keep them coming back day after day. Let's take a look at some of the more popular ways you can generate first time traffic:

Traffic Exchanges

How would you like to have hundreds, even thousands, of visitors to your site, each of whom is guaranteed to spend 20 or 30 seconds looking over your content? Would you like them to review your blog? Rate your blog? How about if they voted for your blog in a head-to-head competition with the blogs of others? If it sounds great, that's because it is.

Blog traffic exchanges are sites that guarantee visitors will visit your blog and spend a pre-determined amount of time there. But there's a price: for each visitor that views your blog, you have to view the blog of another in the same manner.

Here's how it works. When you register your blog on a traffic exchange, you create an account specific to your blog. You earn credits to your account by visiting the sites of others, which are displayed inside a frame with a timer that measures how long you must remain at that site. After an amount of time determined by the site, you enter a code into the frame (this ensures that individuals are actually at their computers) and move to the next site. For each site you visit, you receive credit which is "spent" by your blog being viewed by others. The more blogs you visit, the more visitors you will receive in return.

Most traffic exchanges do not give 1-for-1 credits, meaning you'll have to visit more than 10 blogs to receive 10 visitors. In fact, the ratio is usually only a half-credit per visit, meaning you'll visit 20 sites to receive those visitors, but free, bonus, or mystery credits may be awarded randomly to keep your ratio a little better than one visitor for two visits. The excess credits are generally sold by the traffic exchanges to advertisers who pay for visitors and save themselves the time of waiting at the various sites.

You'll get traffic in proportion to how much time you spend surfing (and don't tell anyone, but you can often have separate browsers open to separate traffic exchanges for simultaneous surfing), but it's important to realize what kind of traffic you're

receiving. To learn the thoughts of your visitors, take a look inside your own head: you're visiting, not to read the blogs, but to get visitors in return…and so it everyone else. Does that mean the traffic is worthless? Not at all. When you look at hundreds of blogs, you'll find a lot of them with features worth emulating and content worth a link or two. You'll also receive visitors who are looking for the kind of content you present. Like-minded and even opposite-minded readers will leave comments, link to you, and may eventually become regular readers. However, it's important to understand that the vast majority are only visiting to get visitors in return and are probably filing their nails while they wait for the allotted time to expire. Then they move on to the next blog.

If you lack the time to sit at your PC manually generating traffic, many traffic exchanges will sell you their surplus visitors for as little as a penny apiece. Five bucks will earn you 500 visitors, a fair price since those visitors are in no way targeted to your content; they are bloggers who are trying to earn your visit in return. You can also purchase banners on many traffic exchanges, which will give you fewer visitors (they are sold by impressions, not clicks) but they will be more interested visitors.

Many traffic exchanges, like the blog directories and blog rings discussed below, will require you to place a small banner on your site, which may limit the number of traffic exchanges you join unless you have room on your page for 15 or 20 tiny banners all in a pile.

Figure 7 - Unless you're careful, your gutter can start to look like this

One final note: before you join a traffic exchange, try to get a feel for how established it is, i.e. how many blogs it features. A brand new traffic exchange may only have a few dozen blogs. That means not only will you to look at the same 20 blogs over and over, you'll have the same 20 bloggers visiting you. Unique traffic is valuable traffic, so stick with those traffic exchanges that can deliver hundreds of unique hits to your blog.

Here are a few of the more popular traffic exchanges:

Blog-a-Zoo

BlogXchange

Blog Clicker

Blog Explosion

Blog Soldiers

Blog Directories

With the popularity of blogs increasing every day, it's nearly impossible for a reader to know what blogs exist and where to find them all. That's the beauty of the blog directory: it organizes and categorizes the thousands of blogs listed its database so readers can find your blog more easily. Blog directories are generally free to the blogger, though they will often require you to feature a small, approved banner on your site.

To get listed in a blog catalog, visit them and submit your site, accurately describing your blog (an inaccurate description will result in less targeted traffic). Check their requirements for banners and be sure to use the link they generate for you – this will ensure you get credit if another blogger joins from your page. Most blog directories will require you to host their images on your own server space, so be sure to follow their directions. Stealing their bandwidth is a sure way to get de-listed in a hurry.

Here are a few of the more popular blog directories, in alphabetical order:

[Blogarama](#)

[Blogwise](#)

[Blog Catalog](#)

[GetBlogs](#)

[Globe of Blogs](#)

[LS Blogs](#)

Blog Rings

The concept behind the blog ring is a simple one: similar blogs join in a ring, each placing a link on their page to the next blog in the ring. Visitors interested in the subject those blogs feature, be it model trains or Green politics, are encouraged to click on the link that leads to the next blog. It's usually a bad idea to send your visitors away, but in this case you're receiving a price for the service: other blogs in the same ring are sending their traffic to you.

The number and type of blog rings is limited only by the types of blogs online, which is to say that unless your blog is absolutely unique in the blogosphere, there is probably a ring or three that will meet your needs. But be careful joining a ring simply because it exists – remember, you're sending some of your traffic away, and it's not often wise to send traffic to your competitors. That's why it's important, before you join a ring, to surf it around once or twice. You'll not only get to see the competition, you may learn a way to one-up it, making your blog stand out in a sea of similar information.

There are specialized blog rings for [Australian blogs](#), [romance writers](#), even those who blog about [knitting](#). With a little searching, you can find a blog ring that fits your content perfectly.

Link Exchanges

A number of programs, known as "link exchanges," will allow your link to be listed on the blogs of others, so long as you carry on your blog a small ad that lists the blogs of

others who are members of the same program. A link exchange works the same way as a blog ring, tying all the featured blogs into a big circle, with the exception that the blogs you link to may not be similarly grouped as they are for most blog rings. When you sign up for the link exchange, you'll receive credits every time your page displays the links of others, and your credits are used up as your blog is displayed on the blogs of other members of the link exchange.

While link exchanges are a convenient way for you to have your blog prominently displayed on the blogs of others, there are several possible side effects that you need to examine before signing up for any link swap program.

The first caveat is that, because link swaps are generally not grouped by subject or content, you may find that your blogs is linking to content that you may find objectionable, like adult content, opposing political blogs, or competitors in your industry. Since it's important to keep tight control on where you send your customers, it's a good idea to watch the blog swap closely to ensure that you are displaying the content you want and that you're not going to alienate your customers and readers by displaying offensive content.

The second issue you may have to deal with is the speed at which some applications operate, especially if they download a java application to your page. Many load more slowly than the average page, forcing your customers to wait or 'jerking' the page they are reading back to the top once the application is fully loaded. If the link exchange

application is causing your loading speed to suffer, it's probably going to cause you more trouble than it's worth. Remember, your readers want to jump right in and read what you have to say. Jerking the page around as soon as they dig in to your content is not going to make many friends.

A final issue is one of cosmetics. Because some link exchange applets are one-size-fits-all, the layout size or colors may clash with your blog. Be sure that you can modify the application to make it unobtrusive before you put something on your page that will prove a distraction to your readers. You want them to notice the links, but like everything else on your page, they should add to it rather than detracting from it.

Here are a few popular link exchange programs:

Gotlinks

Gotop

LinksPal

Link2Blogs

Be sure to look farther than this list, however, as there are certain to be link exchanges that cater specifically to your content or your geographic location. If you can't find one, you can always establish your own link exchange at Link Market.

Visiting Other Blogs – Meet the Competition

Once you have staked out your little corner of the blogosphere, it's time to really size up the competition. You may have met a few of them through blog rings and traffic exchanges, but now it's time to really read their sites and – gasp – get to know them. Just because a blog is a competitor does not mean the blogger is an adversary, and an excellent way to build your reputation and increase your traffic is to introduce yourself to your fellow bloggers and their readers through the comments section of their blogs.

Bloggers love comments because readers who are engaged in a discussion in the comments section will return to a page again and again. Some popular blogs have hundreds of comments on some entries, and for every commenter you can be sure there are dozens who are following along but who do not care for whatever reason to get involved in the discussion. Comment areas will usually allow you to enter your email address and blog address in addition to your name, so for every comment you make, you're insuring that another link to your blog is placed in front of people who might be interested in what you have to say.

However, avoid "comment spam," the practice of dropping comments just for the link or blatantly advertising your site without adding anything useful to the discussion. It's not only a good way to alienate potential readers; it's a good way to get you banned from a site. A good commenter will often earn a link from the host, and if the host has more traffic than you (and it's a good idea to comment only on those blogs that are more established than yours) you'll often pick up readers who see your site linked from that blog. Be sure to reciprocate quickly and thank the other blogger for linking. You've

made a friend who will consistently send targeted traffic your way. If a site has an established link policy, be sure to follow it to the letter. You want to give other blogs every reason to link you and no reason to cut you off.

Traded Links – a Valuable Asset

Here's a little lesson in supply and demand: your demand for links will be insatiable but your supply will be limited. The best possible world for you as a blogger would be to have every blog in the world sending traffic to you, but your blog will have only room to send traffic to a small percentage of them in return. As a result, your links are valuable, and you should treat them as a treasured commodity: hoarded until needed and then spent with the attitude that you must squeeze the most value out of each one.

As you begin building your Blog Empire from a small duchy on the outer edge of the blogosphere to an empire covering much of its virtual continent, you will, to be honest, not have a lot to offer other bloggers. Your traffic will be small. Your brand will be unknown. The big blogs will ignore you and the little ones will do you no good. However, that's no excuse not to start trading your links for whatever you can get for them.

Do an occasional internet search for pages that link to you. Many times, your control panel will pick up any page that links to one of your entries, but much of the time it will mean using Google, Technorati, or MSN searches to see who is linking you. Then check out their blog to see what it might have to offer. If it's a teenage girl's rant blog

that seems to have 3 visitors a day or if it's a blog that is updated monthly, it may not be worth a reciprocal link. However, if you discover that it's a popular destination for people who might be interested in what you have to say, then it's probably worthwhile to drop in, thank the blogger for the link, and join in the discussion. Those readers who are interested in your entry will probably pay you a visit.

Just remember, your links are valuable! Check them constantly to ensure that each one points to a blog that is earning its keep on your front page. Those blogs that have gone into hibernation or that have dropped you should be eliminated. Cull your links repeatedly and mercilessly and always be on the lookout for opportunities to upgrade.

Search Engines and News Engines

There are a million sites out there that promise to submit your site to hundreds, even thousands of search engines. Before you choose one - giving them your money or email address - think for a moment about how many search engines you use. You probably have a favorite or two, as do most people. And in many cases, they are the same ones. That means that so long as your site is listed in the major engines ([Yahoo!](#) and [Google](#) and [MSN](#), to name a few) there's really no need to pay for someone to submit it to a search engine no one uses or to give them your email address (which will coincidentally be deluged by spam from that day forward). It's worthwhile to manually submit your site – ONCE – to the bigger engines, but once you have a few blogs linking to you, search spider programs find you anyway by following from another site.

A second way to avoid paying for others to submit your site to search engines is to pick a blog host or software that features a blog ping, an automatic submission engine that tells blog search sites that you have updated. Many of them allow you to choose which sites you'd like to submit your blog to (choose them all, of course) though there may be a restriction on the number of times you may ping the engines per day (e.g. Blogspot has a once-per-12-hours limit) because over-pinging, like multiple submissions to search engines, can result in your blog being blacklisted. It's far better to err on the side of caution and let the search engines do their own work.

News engines are a different story. If you do a search of Google News for any specific subject, you'll find a number of blogs listed right along with the major media outlets. Some of these independent outfits, like the Blogger News Network may even beat the major news outlets to a story. If what you write is original and newsworthy, submitting your site as a news source will ensure that someone looks over your content for inclusion along with CBS and the New York Times as a source of news. In this case you have little control – other than to ensure you entries are newsworthy – over whether blog is included as a news source. However, a successful listing is worth its weight in gold and is definitely worth pursuing.

Some of the more popular news search engines are:

All the Web News

Alta Vista

Google

[Yahoo!](#)

A site's FAQ will often tell you how to suggest a news site. Suggesting your own site can result in hordes of traffic reading your blog for the latest.

Steppin' Out: Blogging on Multiple Sites

Several of the more popular multi-contributor blogs are run by people who have personal, perhaps non-related, blogs on the side, and when you blog successfully you'll soon attract other bloggers who are so interested in what you have to say that they'll want you to say it on their blogs. They may be blogs that provide multiple sides of your issue or that agree with your outlook but don't specialize precisely where you do. These are blogs where your commentary, even if you're already linked, would fit well on the front page. A successful blogger is always looking for chances to expand into new areas, and there are no rules that say you have to limit yourself to a single blog.

Blogging on multiple sites provides several advantages over simply assuring that you have reciprocal links with valuable sites because of a simple truth: since most blogs have dozens of links, no person can follow them all. Getting your expertise in front of those readers is a good way to show them why they ought to pay you a visit. It's like a free sample of what you offer, and many readers who would never follow a random link will check you out if they like (or even hate) what you have to say. And while you'll want to save your best stuff for your own blog (or at least cross-post it there) it's a good idea

to always be on the lookout for sites that could use your expertise and give you the opportunity to put your work in front of a whole new group of readers.

Developing Content for Other Sites

Even if your blog is not a "writing" blog, there are ways to get your fellow bloggers to feature your work and send visitors to your site. The easiest of these – if you have some programming ability and a little creativity – is to create content they can feature on their own blogs (which of course, has a link to yours). You see the concept everywhere, though you may not have thought about their possibilities even as you clicked their links. It might be a "test" that allows the person to decide what historical mass murderer they are, displaying a picture and a description. It might be an insult generator, where they input a name and you give them a creative putdown for their readers to enjoy. It might display the ticker symbols and prices of their favorite stock. Whatever it is to the other blogger and his readers, to you it is an excellent way to get readers to visit your blog, enjoy some interaction with it, and take away a bit of code which will in turn send you more readers, more traffic, and more customers.

If you have the ability to create amusing pictures – especially if your blog is dedicated to them – offering your readers the chance to use your stuff for the price of a link back to your site can garner you readers from all over who are looking for interesting and amusing content for their own blogs or web pages. It's a good idea to make your webpage name an unobtrusive part of every picture, so that even if the users of your

content forget to link you back, your name will be out there, associated with creative and important content across the blogosphere.

The possibilities are limited only by your technical skill and creativity, and can mean hordes of people coming to your blog not just out of curiosity, but to page through your blog for a chance to put your work in front of their readers.

Letting Others Put Your Name Out There

A final way to generate interested traffic is to send your entries to blogs that talk about blogs. [Slate Magazine](#) features a column dedicated to blog entries about hot topics, and the Wall Street Journal's "[Best of the Web](#)" daily column provides a daily look at newsworthy and amusing online content. Sites like these can introduce your content to readers that might never find you otherwise. As you travel the blogosphere, be on the lookout for anyone who might need your content. Then provide it to them. Don't get discouraged if they don't feature you every time. Remember, all your fellow bloggers (the serious ones anyway) are competing for the same attention.

Keeping Readers With Expertise

You'll draw your readers, for the most part, by promotion - by letting them know you exist. But you'll keep them, if you keep them, by giving them value for their time. Remember, your readers are 'paying' you a visit. They are 'spending' time on your site, and they expect to get something in return. If your site is an opinion or news site, that

something is your valuable opinion on a posted subject. If your site is an art site, that something is quality content and commentary.

You're the expert here, or ought to be. You will be expected to know more about what you post than anyone else. Being the expert means that you'll have to work harder and longer than any of your readers. It means you'll have to dig and cull and study. It means you'll throw away 10 stories or articles for every one you post. It means you'll know what your readers expect and you'll give it to them every time. That's the price you pay for readers who value your opinion enough to come back day after day and week after week.

Writing Unique and Valuable Content

Your readers expect you to write what no one else is writing – that's why they're on your site and not another. This should not be difficult if you decided wisely when you designed your blog originally. You've got to make every entry a masterpiece: something worth reading and something worth linking to. Just posting part of a story with small commentary works in small doses, but everyone can read the news themselves. Unless you have something worthwhile to say about a story, some valuable insight to present or relevant commentary that ties this story to other stories, it may not be worth posting. Your readers return because they value what you have to say. Don't disappoint them by giving them too much unexpected fluff, and don't simply rehash the opinions of others without giving your readers the satisfaction of your own.

Writing Timely Content

Valuable content is content that's both relevant and timely. If you comment on the news, re-hashing an article from 2 years ago is not going to cut it. If you present the sports, talking about a game from last fall – unless you tie it into the next game – is going to leave your readers uninterested. Whatever you write, you need to tie it to today, right now, this minute.

That means, unless your blog is a reference site, at least daily updates. It usually means several updates a day. Remember, you are a member of the new media, and the new media is on top of the news. When your readers return, they expect that you'll be ahead of them: that's why they are coming in the first place. You'll have to set an update schedule that will keep you ahead of your readers.

Comments and Input

In order for your readers to return again and again, it's important to make them feel like your site is their site. You need to make them feel at home in your Blog Empire. One way to do that is by allowing them to make comments, ask questions, and provide information through timely feedback. This can be done either through the blog-supplied comments, through special free add-ons such as Haloscan or by adding an attached forum through a free service such as ForumUp. Be aware, however, that on the internet as in life, there's no such thing as a free lunch. Free service providers are actually

providing the same service to advertisers that you are by putting ads in front of your readers. If you send your readers to a forum on someone else's server, you will generally not receive the advertising revenue that traffic creates. That's their payment for providing the service to you without cost.

The comments sections of popular blogs are "where the action is." Arguments can last for days, even weeks, and provide consistent fodder for updated or pointed entries. If you've stated something controversial on the front page, your readers will certainly let you know what they think, providing the perfect opportunity to clarify, modify, or expand your argument. If you've listed ways that a certain software package can be modified, knowledgeable readers can provide additional information, making your blog that much more valuable to your other readers. Comments can also provide valuable feedback to you, and what is sometimes more important, encouragement to let you know that your efforts are appreciated and worthwhile.

If you decide to allow comments and feedback, it's important to decide how much time you want to spend monitoring the traffic it generates. If discussions get "off track," you may need to publish (and enforce) forum rules, which may be as simple as editing content for bad language or as complicated as ensuring – if your blog is related to the stock market, for example - that information presented is not in violation of a myriad of SEC regulations. Remember, your readers, like the author they read, always come with their own agendas. If your comments section gets wild and crazy, that's great for your

traffic. If it becomes a haven for spammers or stock manipulators, you may have to spend more time reading and editing than that traffic is worth.

Banning Readers

Once your comments section takes on a life of its own, you'll certainly meet a lot of well-informed and interesting people who will make your job easier and your content more valuable. You will see relationships develop and blossom and you'll get to know your most faithful readers as far more than just words on a screen. Getting to know your readers will provide encouragement as you see how the content you provide them helps them in real life. It's one of the finest pleasures of the job.

But you'll also attract those readers whom you would rather not deal with. They may be spammers who use your forums to promote their own sites. They may be ne'er-do-wells who simply show up to gainsay everything and abuse their fellow readers. And that means that you may have to ban readers, making it impossible for them to post on your site.

Figure 8 - There will always be people who think they can run your empire better than you.

Banning readers is not something that ought to be done lightly. However, for your forums and comment sections to succeed, they must conform to the goals you have set for your overall site. If after several warnings, a reader insists that the rules do not apply to him, it may be best for the rest of your readers to remove that reader from the discussion.

What About Free Speech?

If and when you ban someone – or even credibly threaten to do so – you'll certainly be attacked with the Free Speech argument. Doesn't everyone have the right to say what they want?

Sure they do, but not in your home, and your blog is your home. It's your property. You provide the service, you set the rules, and just as no one has the right to come into your home and abuse your family, no one has an absolute right to enter into your forums, push fraudulent medicine or imitation watches, and abuse your guests.

That's why periodically publishing the forum rules is a must. While it might become necessary to remove someone from the discussion, it is only fair that you set expectations and enforce them fairly and consistently. The value of the forum is not in the cathartic (or financial) benefits it provides your readers, but in the information and conversation they share. Allowing your forums to become an abusive free-for-all will alienate the very readers that you want to keep. Putting out a few obnoxious and abusive guests is a small price to pay to allow the vast majority of your readers, who will have valuable input and discussions, to enjoy their visits to your virtual home.

XML and RSS Feeds

As a blogger, you want everyone to have access to your content. One of the more popular ways to "step out" of the blogosphere is to provide your readers an opportunity to get your headlines without even having to visit your blog. This is important for one reason: you may not post something that interests them, and after a few days, they may forget you exist. It can't be helped: everything you write is going to interest someone, but few will be interested in everything you write. An RSS feed gives these casual or

occasional readers a chance to see your headlines and visit only when they are interested in a particular subject.

If you've visited many blogs, you've probably seen a small banner like this: ![+ MY YAHOO!] If you click on the banner (and if you have a My Yahoo! page of your own) you'll find that the blogger's headlines will appear on your "My Yahoo!" page, allowing you to quickly scan their news without having to go to the blog. You've discovered a blog that provides an RSS feed. It's written by a blogger who wants to keep his blog in front of readers.

If you want to really dig into the technology behind RSS/XML, a good place to start is XML.com, but the important information is not how RSS and XML work, but rather the work they do. An RSS feed allows you to syndicate your content, like a syndicated columnist provides content to many newspapers, allowing other bloggers to provide real-time links to your information. The ability to syndicate your content, moving it out of your blog and onto the blogs of others, is one of the most important features of whatever blog software you use.

There are many sites which will publish your RSS feeds. Here are a few easy ones to get you started:

Blog Digger

Feedster

News is Free

[Syndic8](#)

PART III: PROFITING FROM YOUR BLOG EMPIRE

Generating Profits

Your Blog Empire, in order to be profitable, must generate sufficient income to cover not only your actual costs, but to pay you for your time and expertise. The costs you can keep under control by intelligently managing the money you spend on promotion and bandwidth. Potential customers you manage by attracting and keeping interested readers. But to make a profit, you've got to make a sale, and there are two ways to accomplish that: selling clicks or coffee cups.

The first method, selling clicks, means placing ads, like banners, on your site. When your customers click the ads (or occasionally when they simply view them) you collect a payment from the advertiser. In this case, your customers are companies to whom you sell access to your readers.

The second method, selling coffee cups, is not limited to ceramic drinking devices, but to anything you sell directly to your readers. In this case, your readers are your customers, purchasing from you products that advertise your site or information only you can provide.

Selling clicks is the easiest and most popular of the two methods, so let's take a look at it first. But first, let's take a look at your readers.

Readers don't love ads. They don't love banners. They don't love intrusive, flashing distractions and you're not going to please them by placing ads on your page. Thus you must take the advice Machiavelli offered his prince six centuries ago: "While it may not always be possible to be loved, it's critical to avoid being hated." That advice, delivered in a political context, holds true in an advertising one. It's critical that if your ads do not attract readers to your site (and it's a guarantee that readers are not coming to admire your banners), you should at least make an effort not to drive them away.

That's a problem, because those ads which are most hated by readers are those which are most profitable to you: popups and java applets.

Popups we all know and hate. They are ads that open a new browser, usually displaying the advertiser's own site or an ad with a link to it. They cause your page to load more slowly (especially if your reader is on a dialup connection) and they aggravate a reader who is not interested in the object advertised. Multiple popups on a single page should be avoided at all costs – if you open 6 browser windows on your reader's desktop, it's virtually guaranteed that reader is not one you'll see again. Of course, most modern browsers and several specialty software products are available to banish popups altogether, and if your readers have them, your popup campaign will probably be strangled in its cradle.

The second hated ad-type is a java application that floats across the screen, necessitating that the reader close it before he can read your page. It's an aggravation

(most of them scurry around the screen, making them difficult to close) and an aggravated reader is not one receptive to your content. He may even decide your page is not worth reading before you have an opportunity to make a good impression.

Avoid the temptation of featuring these kinds of ads. The reason these ads are more profitable than unobtrusive pay-per-click ads is that they are more effective – your reader must interact with the ad in order to get to your content. But the reader's reaction may be to avoid your content altogether. In that case, you have lost both a reader and a potential customer.

Google AdSense and Pay-Per-Click Programs

You've seen the towers on hundreds of sites: ever-changing boxes of text ads that reflect the content in front of the reader's face. If you are reading about an election, the ads may be related to political parties. If you're reading about automobiles, the ads may be hawking car parts. Whatever the ads are selling, they are somehow related to the content and therefore of interest to the reader.

The most popular ad program of this nature on the internet is Google's AdSense program. Google ads can be found on thousands of blogs and retail sites, and there's a reason for it: with AdSense you don't need to choose which ads you'll display and you don't have to find your own advertisers. You simply sign up for the program and Google will scan

your page, assigning advertisements based on your content and displaying them in a box (or tower) on your page through a small piece of code you integrate into your design. When a reader clicks on the ad, you receive a commission for delivering that reader to the advertiser's website. Because the ad content is related to your page, the odds of a reader clicking are much higher than random ads you might otherwise feature.

But Google's AdSense is not the only choice available; the number of blog-ready ad programs has multiplied with the popularity of the blog business. Other choices include programs dedicated more toward blogs, give you control over the advertisers on your site, and pay your commissions online, even in small amounts.

A few smaller programs worth exploring are:

Blog Ads

Crisp Ads

Grokads

Tagword

New ad programs arise every day, but it's important to decide, before you commit, if a programs will give you the best return on your limited ad space. Check a few of your favorite blogs to see what they are using. Compare the content of the page to the content of the ads. Decide if you feel motivated to click on an ad. If you feel the temptation to follow an ad to another site, chances are your readers will feel it as well.

The second pay-per-click type is less direct but perhaps more profitable in the long run: associate or affiliate-based programs. A one-time option (called one-time because you'll get paid once for every sale) is available through online retailers like Amazon.

Have you ever seen a book review that featured a clickable link allowing you to buy a book right at the time you're thinking about it? Chances are that the site you're reading has a deal with the retailer for a cut of the purchase price. Amazon's [Associates](#) program will provide you with a user id and code for any item they sell, giving you a kickback from any sale made via your site. There are literally hundreds of retailers that offer similar programs, so if you routinely talk about any item sold online, be on the lookout for ways you can profit from the interest you are creating in your readers. If someone is going to profit from your writing, shouldn't it be you?

But other associate and affiliate programs are available that may continue to pay you even after the first click. For example, if you're talking about junk email and review a site like [Spam Arrest](#), joining their affiliate program ahead of time can result in a lifetime of profits from a single post and banner. In the case of Spam Arrest, readers can sign up for a free mail box guaranteed to reduce the spam they receive. If they purchase the ability to download spam-free mail to their desktop, you receive a percentage of the sale price. If those customers become affiliates, you receive a small percentage of their sales. It's multi-level marketing – not a Ponzi scheme, which is to be avoided at all costs – and can result in a growing number of referrals. When you mention the product on your site, be sure to feature an unobtrusive banner or text ad. It will remain on your

site, continually building your customer base, even as those customers seek customers of their own.

It is important, however, not to post simply for the purpose of selling, because your customers come to read your content, not your ads. It's doubly important to check the reputation of any company you advertise. The internet is full of scams, and your customers will not appreciate you taking part in any scheme that bilks them out of money. Your reputation is paramount: protect it even at the cost of missing out on a few dollars of short-term revenue.

Selling Banners by the Impression

A final type of banner ad is sold by "impressions." Less popular than pay-per-click ads because the advertiser is simply paying for his ad to be seen and not acted upon, they can still be a profitable way to sell ad space once your readership grows. Let's say, for example, that your blog is dedicated to [investments](#) in the natural resources sector. Your readers are also potential investors in the companies that inhabit the market you talk about, but there is no way to know if a reader buys (or sells) stocks or investigates companies based on your writing.

In this case, selling ad space directly to a company that will pay you to simply feature their banner can be worthwhile. You promise the company that a certain number of people will view their banner or that it will remain on your site for a certain amount of time, and they pay for the link. You'll know how much revenue to expect every month

and you won't have to share it with an agency that takes a cut for bringing advertisers to you.

While potentially more profitable than pay-per-click programs, selling banners by the impression has several drawbacks, the most difficult of which is convincing advertisers that you are worth their money. That's why your expertise and contacts are so important in choosing your blog topic. Once you become a clearinghouse for information, you can be sure that companies – especially small ones in small industries – will know you. If you have a million readers a month and are an acknowledged expert in their industry, they may be happy to pay to have their name in front of their readers, especially if they can measure the number of people of visit their site as a result of your ads.

But watch out for conflict of interest, real or perceived. When you feature a company's ad, you may feel (and will be perceived by your readers to feel) pressure to treat your advertisers with kid gloves. It's a part of the deal: your advertisers are not paying you to have you bad-mouth their company on your pages. So it's essential that you be upfront with your readers when mentioning companies, informing them if you are a shareholder or that the company is an advertiser. It's often best for your reputation to never mention a customer company or its main competitors directly, and while this can reduce your ability to sell these profitable ads, it can also help you avoid the reputation of being a shill and can help keep your commentary (or at least readers' perceptions of your commentary) independent.

Swag, or Getting Your Customers to Advertise for You

On to coffee cups. In addition to selling access to advertisers, it's profitable to sell items directly to your readers. Have you written a book, an ebook, or a research report?? Why not feature it prominently on your page? Is your brand becoming famous? Why not have a case of coffee mugs or t-shirts printed up and sell them on the site? If your readers identify with you and with your brand, selling swag is an excellent way to build upon that customer loyalty.

If you want to manage it all online, companies like Those Shirts will handle your sales and may even help design your swag. They can even sell your shirts to customers coming from other sites.

A more profitable way to sell swag is to either install your own store software (not recommended for the amateur) or to set up a store through Yahoo!, Ebay, or a similar online merchant. You promote your swag, passing your customers to your customized online store. When they purchase your swag, your store manager processes the payment, giving you the money minus commission, and you ship the item out. Your local printer can certainly create all the shirts and mugs you can sell this way, and he'll surely appreciate the business.

Swag, for a popular Blog Empire, can be the most profitable of all financial endeavors. It builds customer loyalty; it gets your customers to promote your site; it tells you that

your brand is valuable enough that readers want to become your allies. But like any profitable business, the costs involved must be managed carefully. It may be cheaper to bulk order T-shirts, but it will cost you more if they don't sell. The best way to profit from swag is to start small and establish a clientele, even if your profit at first is less than it might otherwise be. Remember, think big but start smart.

Donations – "Ask and ye shall receive"

Have you ever visited a blog that displays your name in a banner ad? Maybe your eyes have snapped across the page when you caught the sight of your own name, preceded by "Hello," and followed by, "please make a donation." You've found a site that that is practicing the easiest way to raise money from satisfied readers: simply asking them.

One popular system for soliciting contributions from readers is the Amazon Honor System. The Amazon Honor System provides a secure process wherein your readers can make a discreet contribution by credit card to you for as little as one dollar or for as many as fifty dollars.

Once you sign up with the Amazon Honor System, you'll receive HTML code to add to your blog. This code displays one of several non-intrusive banners with a button that allows the reader to get more information or make a donation (if your customers are Amazon customers, they'll even display the customer's name in the ad). If that customer makes a donation, Amazon will collect the money, deduct their commission, and pass the rest on to you with a note telling you who made the donation. You may

want to make very occasional "thank you" posts (be very careful, however, about identifying givers and never reveal the amounts they donate). This is a nice way to thank those readers who donate while reminding others that bloggers have to eat, too.

A second popular site for collecting donations is [Paypal](). A Paypal button allows anyone who has a Paypal account to make a direct donation to your site. Like Amazon, Paypal allows the reader to make a donation by credit card. Paypal, however, can also be integrated into another donation-type project you may also want to consider, that of special reports for your readers and a subscription or pay-per-view basis.

Subscriptions and Special "Insider" Reports

Most people are willing to pay for information they find valuable. They buy newspapers, magazines, and books, so why wouldn't they pay for your information? The first reason is that you are giving it away for free. While some readers will voluntarily make a donation to keep you warmed and fed, the vast majority will not.

But if the information you provide is valuable, especially if it is of a financial nature, you may consider holding some back, offering special "insider" or "in-depth" coverage for those who wish to learn more.

One way to do so is to set up a special, secure website to archive your individual special reports. When readers send you a subscription payment, you email them a password that will expire after a certain period of time. A good example of this is

George Ure's [Urban Survival](#), a blog dedicated to unusual and unorthodox economic trends. Ure publishes a special weekly report, known as [Peoplenomics](#), which lays out a weekly examination of one or more issues discussed in Urban Survival during the week. Back issues are cataloged on the site, so any subscriber has the right to go back into prior years, even when such reports are outside the bounds of their subscription period. When readers' passwords expire, they are simply removed from the master database. Setting up and maintaining a separate list of passwords will not take a lot of time until you have dozens of subscribers. By that time, your revenue will certainly cover one of the many commercial database management tools on the market.

The second way is to provide the reports through an autoresponder or via email. With email, you simply create a list of email addresses and send your reports to them as they are written. While this is easier at first than establishing a completely separate site, eventually your readers are going to request back issues or are going to lose emails, necessitating you spend a lot of time re-sending information This manual process, if established, ought to be quickly transferred over to a dedicated site. It's a good beginning, however, if you're just testing the market to see how your readers respond to the offer.

There are two caveats to consider, however, before offering special reports and information. The first is that the commitment you are making must be kept, even if you have only one subscriber (and you will, at some point, only have one). You must decide if the extra time and effort to make a special weekly report is worthwhile. That

subscriber is entrusting you with his money and expects that you will keep your end of the bargain by fulfilling your promises. There's no easier way to alienate your most faithful readers than by not giving them what they pay for.

Other than the time you spend providing the information, the most important consideration is whether the content is really valuable enough to demand a subscription. If you have proven and useful insight that's worth paying for, giving your readers access to it can be a paying proposition. If you give the same information away on your blog two weeks later, or if your "insider" information is readily available elsewhere, your reader will rightly conclude that you have tricked them.

Remember, the long-term success of your Blog Empire relies on your integrity. Keeping your promises, especially when they are directly tied to a financial contribution on the part of your readers, can make or break your reputation and your bank account.

The First Entry – and Where it Leads

Now it's time to write the first entry. It's time to take the first step real step to building a Blog Empire for profit.

You've decided what unique contribution you can make to the blogosphere, found the place where you will carve your niche and establish your capitol.

You've pored over blog designs, scribbled up logos, picked and discarded a hundred names, finally settling on one that will tell your readers who you are and what they can expect in your Blog Empire.

You've picked advertisers, designed coffee cups and sweatshirts with your logo on them, maybe even ordered a few for yourself and close friends.

But now it's time to give your readers all you can. Your first entry is the cornerstone of your Blog Empire, and it's time to lay it.

Figure 9 - It's good to be the king

Once you write it, you'll probably find that the second flows from it, and then the third from the second. In fact, all those ideas you have that you want to share with the world

will inspire other ideas and reveal more genius and more creativity than you ever dreamed you had.

The first entry doesn't need to be the best you'll ever write. In fact, as you write hundreds, even thousands of entries, you'll hone your skill, improve your delivery, and sharpen your message.

The first entry doesn't need to grab the world by the throat. In fact, it may be the least-viewed entry you'll ever write, as each entry brings more readers who become voluntary citizens of your Blog Empire.

But the first entry will be the most important entry you ever write, because with it, you dedicate yourself to building a Blog Empire that will bring you enjoyment and profit until the day you decide to go on to bigger and better things. It will be the most important entry, because if you never write it, your Blog Empire will remain only a dream, and the Blogosphere will be denied all the enjoyment and information that you can uniquely bring it.

And you'll find that when you pass the thousandth reader, the millionth page view, the first month after you decide that being a blogger is something you want to do and can do full time, you'll look back on that first entry and realize it was the cornerstone of a Blog Empire of which you are immensely proud.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, *"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."*

Blog your way to victory, you can do it.

Empire awaits you.

GLOSSARY

BANDWIDTH: A measurement of the carrying capacity of a network. The more data you send, the more bandwidth you are using. Most online hosts will assign a set monthly amount of bandwidth with your account. Bandwidth which exceeds this amount will often result in an excess bandwidth charge. Images require far more bandwidth to transmit than does text.

BANNING: The process of removing posting privileges from a reader. This is done either through individual blog software or a blog host by preventing a computer at a certain IP address from commenting.

BLOG: A frequently updated online journal or publication. Blogs can be encompass any subject, however, they not simply the online portion of a print or broadcast outlet, but are generally online-only and may rely on other media outlets for content.

BLOGOSPHERE: The virtual world in which blogs exist and relate to one another.

COMMENT SPAM: The practice of commenting simply to leave a link or promote another site. Comment spam can be reported to most blog hosts and can cause the spammer, if he hosts his own blog, to be banned from the host.

GIF (Graphics Interchange Format): A popular image format.

GUTTER: The side area of a blog layout that may feature links, ads, or interactive content.

HYPERLINK: A piece of HTML code that sends the user to another place. Also, "link."

HTML (Hypertext Markup Language): The language in which many web pages are assembled and displayed. Pages written in HTML often feature the suffix .HTM or .HTML.

IP ADDRESS: The address at which a computer is connected to the internet. Blog software tracks the IP addresses of those who interact with the blog, giving the blogger the power to limit access from remote locations and to make detailed reports of traffic.

JPG or JPEG (Joint Photographic Experts Group): A popular image format.

OBJECT (or COMPONENT): A piece of code that performs a specific task. Objects may include web counters, online quizzes, or linked banner ads. Objects are often organized in the GUTTER of a BLOG.

PDF (Portable Document Format): A document format used for large documents or newsletters on the web. .PDF documents may be scanned from paper documents or

may be created digitally. Those created from scanned documents will usually require more BANDWIDTH than those created from word processing documents.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication): a format for syndicating news, popular with bloggers.

SWAG: Promotional merchandise related to a website or organization.

TAGBOARD: A small box on a blog's main page in which messages can be left. Tagboards are usually unregulated and can accumulate COMMENT SPAM by those who misuse your blog to promote their own.

TEMPLATE: A preformatted layout that can be used as the basis for a BLOG. Templates allow the user to import images, and change colors and fonts while retaining the original look of the page.

TRAFFIC: readers or viewers who visit your blog.

URL (Uniform Resource Locator): The address of a website or document on the internet.

WEBLOG: See "BLOG"

WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) INTERFACE: An interface type that allows the blogger to see what a post will look like while creating it, as opposed to an HTML interface where a blogger may manually enter HYPERLINKS or HTML code.

XML (Extensible Markup Language): a markup language which describes data. It is often used in conjunction with RSS news feeds.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

New To Internet Marketing and need some tips?

[Click Here](#) for the best Internet Marketing Course Available

Domain Reseller Accounts & Web Hosting

http://DomainAbbey.com Domain Names for your new website are a bargain here plus you can get a Domain Name Reseller Account!

Web Hosting

[Host4Profit](#) - Offers your 1st account for only $25 and then all additional accounts are only $5 with no limit!

Merchant Account

Authorize - This is a real pro merchant account and a super cost- We search high and low before we personally signed up with this merchant provider

PayPal - Another Merchant account with a Free signup if you are just getting started and doing lower dollar sales volume

Autoresponders

GetResponse: GetResponse is a complete email marketing service preferred by thousands of users to deliver their campaigns, newsletters, follow-ups and autoresponder messages.

Aweber: The Most Reliable, Easiest, Cost Effective Autoresponder to Capture Visitor Sign Ups, Send Unlimited Follow Ups and Newsletters Increasing Your Profits.

Recommended Reading

"Learn how to make a life-changing income of $100,000 to $250,000 with your Internet business... even if you're a computer dummy!"

Review: "The Insider Secrets to Marketing Your Business on the Internet" by Corey Rudl

I've just finished reading the brand-new 2005 version of Corey Rudl's top-selling Internet marketing system, "*The Insider Secrets To Marketing Your Business On The Internet*," and frankly, I'm overwhelmed by the huge amount of critical wealth-building information he's managed to pack into these **two hefty binders and 3 CDs!**

But I guess I shouldn't be surprised; after all, when the box containing these materials showed up at my door, it weighed in at **over 10 pounds!**

That's 10 pounds of the most comprehensive **marketing strategies, test results, case studies, tools, and ideas** for generating a life-changing income online (from $1,000s to <u>over $1 million</u>) you're ever likely to read!

I'm talking about information like...

- Step-by-step advice for starting your own Internet business **in as little as 48 hours!**

- How to build a top-selling web site... for less than $100!

- Where to find hot products to sell (in 20 minutes or LESS)!

- 100s of FREE and cheap online tools, resources, and software

- How to get 1,000s of qualified NEW visitors to your web site... for FREE!

- How to **get #1 rankings in the search engines** and get tons of FREE traffic from the "Big Guys" like Google!

- Secrets to writing sales copy that can **increase sales by up to 400% (or MORE)!** And <u>much more</u>!

If you're unsure who Corey is, you should know that he's been a recognized expert in online marketing for a decade now. Not only has he generated **$40,000,000 in online sales**, his sites also attract **450,000 visitor a week!**

What's *really* great about Corey is that he can show ANYONE how to have a **wildly profitable Internet business** (that takes just a few hours each day to run)...

... even if you're an absolute computer dummy!

And <u>if you *already* have an Internet business</u>, he can help YOU, too. The advanced sections of his system show you how you can **increase your sales by 400%... 700%... even as much as 1,000%!**

I give Corey's system the highest rating possible! Its 1,300+ pages of step-by-step lessons contain the exact SAME tested and proven fast-growth strategies he has personally used to generate over $40 million in online sales -- *starting on a shoestring budget!*

And it's the SAME SYSTEM that literally **1,000s of his students have used** to drive "truckloads" of cash out of the Internet.

I strongly urge you to check out Corey's wealth-building system as soon as possible! <u>Click here</u> for a FREE preview.