



Blogs

“You should have a blog.” How many times have you thought this or had it suggested to you by a family member or customer? Internet marketing and sales can be an important part of increasing revenue for many small businesses. But do you really need a blog?

The definitive answer is “maybe!”

According to a study by America Online and Roper Starch Worldwide, nearly half of Internet users say the medium is becoming a necessity, and almost three-quarters use it to make buying decisions. That’s a lot of potential. But can blogs work for your business? Only if they are part of your overall marketing plan, and if you have budgeted time and money for them.

In this tip sheet we will discuss some of the pros and cons of blogs to help you decide if they make sense for your farm. It takes technical knowledge and skills to create and implement blogs, so be sure you understand how they can help your business before you invest time and money in them.

Do I need a blog?

A blog is simply part of a Web site where an author’s entries are displayed in chronological order. Think of it as an online diary or notebook. Many bloggers use their blogs to chronicle the minutiae of their lives, their political opinions, favorite recipes, local news, or any other subject imaginable.

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You can use a blog as a marketing tool. It gives people insight into the successes, challenges and joys of rural living and can connect them to your farm and help grow your sales. Today’s consumer often seeks out online information about a farm before committing to a visit or purchase. A blog can give potential customers a glimpse into life on your farm, your products, and—most importantly—you! Consumers admire the hard work and rural life of farmers, and they enjoy feeling a part of yours, even if only via a blog.

Benefits of blogs

Farmers are beginning to use blogs to show customers life on the farm. Marian Welch, of Justamere Tree Farm in Worthington, Massachusetts, started blogging in the summer of 2007. With a few months of entries under her belt she’s beginning to get more comfortable with the process. “I’m getting into a rhythm and doing about 2–3 entries a month,” says Marian.

“I try to keep them short—I figure people aren’t going to want me to go on and on! Plus that’s how I am anyway.” She notes that many of her customers are surprised that she has a blog. “People look at me and go, ‘You have a blog?’ I tell them I know, it doesn’t sound like me!”

Barbara Parry of Foxfire Fiber and Designs in Shelburne, Massachusetts started blogging in spring 2007. Her photo-rich blog is full of details about life on her busy sheep farm. “I am not very computer savvy so I thought I would never be able to figure out how to do it,” says Barb. “But there are a number of services that make it easy. It’s been a nice tool to have. People feel like they have a more personal connection to my business and the farm.”

Marian and Barb understand that many people enjoy reading blog entries and that they are looking for ‘useful’ information—a recipe, a story, a connection to life on the farm. Both women have learned a number of valuable lessons about blogs:

User statistics can tell you a lot about your blog. Blog software offers a number of ways of analyzing your visitor patterns: how people are finding you, how long they are staying, are they subscribing



to your blog and more. This data can show you how to adjust your blog and Web site to best match your customers' interests.

Blog entries get picked up by search engines. "If I mention a festival that we are attending in our blog, we can see that people have come to us by searching for that event," says Marian. "They get curious about us and spend time on our site."

Recipes are a consistent attraction. "I try to make at least one entry per month a recipe because people love food," says Marian.

Pictures are key. We're visual creatures. Photographs illustrate your stories beautifully, and they don't need to be professionally done. "Remembering to keep your camera handy all the time is a challenge," says Barb. "But things don't stand still on the farm and good pictures help tell your story."

Contests can draw people to your blog. "We've been handing out our card at farmers markets. It has a nice picture on one side and information on the back to tell them how to go to our site and register for a free gift certificate," says Marian. "We're definitely going to do this every couple of months, as we get dozens of new people registered each time we do it."

Challenges to blogs

Mastering the technology

Many farmers find it hard to make the time for anything computer-related, especially if they are not comfortable with the technology. The learning curve for blogging is not steep if you are already a computer user. But some farmers are literally starting from square one. "It only took six months to get this started!" says Marian, who began her quest with only a rudimentary understanding of how computers work. Look for local classes to help you boost your skills. They provide a comfortable learning environment where beginners are welcomed.

Making the time and finding a balance

"Your busy season is when you have the most subject material, but don't wait until that time to get things off the ground," says Barb. "I started the blog because I wanted to share what was going on in lambing season since it takes over my life and I never answer e-mails. But that was a hard time to get started!"

Over committing is a common pitfall among new bloggers. Excited by the process, some bloggers post very frequently, only to find that life on the farm reasserts itself and the blog gets abandoned. If you can only manage erratic entries, your readers (i.e. customers) will abandon you. Pace yourself. It is much better to post less frequent but more high quality entries

than to be constantly apologizing in your blog for not posting for the last few months. "Once you start it up and have a following you need to make time to do it," says Barb. "Because my blog is photo-intensive I need to have knitting in my lap while they upload."

Keeping it fresh

This goes hand in hand with balance. If you are only planning to do two to three entries a month you will easily find a variety of things to talk about. And that keeps it fresh for your readers.

Staying positive

Blogging can be a very personal process. But if you are blogging about life on your farm remember that your blog is primarily a marketing tool, not a personal diary. Keep your blog positive, but realistic. While there will be moments of drama on your farm, everyone appreciates a happy ending. For example, turn the tale of weather-related crop problems from one of scarcity into one of gratitude. Don't tell customers you are expecting a poor harvest—tell them that this year's crop is going to be even more special, and that they should stop by soon to get some, as supplies are limited.

Bringing it all together

Taken separately, Web sites, blogs, stores and e-mail newsletters are interesting activities with some potential. When they are well-integrated they can increase your sales. There are numerous examples of online businesses that are very successful at integrated online marketing and sales—and not just Amazon.com. Your blog should drive customers to your store, not just give them free entertainment. Your e-mail newsletter can tell thousands of readers that you are having a monthly sale and give them an easy path to a purchase in your online store. Your online store can offer a simple, efficient way to get a piece of the farm delivered to a customer across town or across the country. Understanding the power of these tools collectively will help you understand how to make them work for you, so you can spend more time doing the work you love.



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