

Global PR Blog Week 2.0

## Adding Your Voice to the Conversation. Why CEOs Should Blog

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EDITORS' CHOICE | CEO Blogs

Just how taxing is it to be one of today's chief executive officers? Most are on call, in one form or another, nearly 24 hours a day. According to an article in the [Pocket Manager](#), it's difficult to determine precisely how many hours the typical CEO works, but research shows that U.S.- and U.K.-based chief executive officers [work the longest hours](#). While Oracle's Larry Ellison has attempted to cut back on his [80-hour work week](#), most CEOs either haven't mastered the technique or don't have that luxury.

So why in the world would CEOs take on the extra task of blogging—a communication medium with a tentative ROI that remains largely unproven?

Marketing pundit and best-selling author [Seth Godin](#) says [they shouldn't](#). According to Godin, blogs work when they are based on candor, urgency, timeliness, pithiness, and controversy. "Does this sound like a CEO to you?" Godin asks. "Short and sweet, folks: If you can't be at least four of the five things listed above, please don't bother . . . save the fluff for the annual report."

As blogging evolves, however, many of today's CEOs-turned-bloggers in fact are making the time—and having a good time—using the very characteristics Godin lists as what makes blogging successful.

### Time to Blog?

[Bob Cramer](#), CEO of Marlborough, Mass.-based [LiveVault](#), sees blogging not as an extra activity, but as something inherent to his business.

"The essence of our business is leveraging the Internet to transform how organizations run the process of data backup," he says. "Since our business model is based around the net, blogging is a natural fit for us." Cramer, who uses [Six Apart's Movable Type](#) blog tool, manages the time demands of blogging by loosely scheduling time.

"I aim for one blog entry a week at a minimum, and while I don't formally schedule my posts, I do put blogging on my to-do list," he says. "When I get the RSS feeds from blogs I read and I see a topic that interests me, I'll take some notes and make the time to write about it."

[Phil Libin](#), president of [CoreStreet](#), in Cambridge, Mass., takes a more free-form approach to balancing his blog time with his executive responsibilities.

"In every other facet of the company, I have a schedule," he says. "There are deadlines; there are reports; there are meetings, and so on. If I tried to extend that schedule to my blog, I wouldn't bother blogging. If I had to say to myself, 'Here are ten topics, now sit down and write about them,' the whole experience would become bland and boring. So instead I post when something intrigues me, when something seems like it will interest my readers. I'd rather have readers remember me for having written something memorable than for when I last posted."

Gil Friend, CEO of Berkeley, Calif.-based [Natural Logic](#), doesn't have a regular posting pattern, but does have posting consistency over time, having blogged actively on his [Radio Blog](#) since June 2002.

"I'll go through a week or two of not posting, and then I'll have days when I write five posts, then a single post—it varies," he says. "I don't know if that's a problem for readers. When I started blogging I wasn't thinking about all of that. It was as much because I like to try new things as anything. But I continue blogging because writing is one of the ways I figure out what I'm thinking. And, what I think and what I write about are often key reasons people engage my company."

"One of the best things publishing a blog has done has been to force me to spend a few minutes here and there thinking about issues I encounter in a more structured way and crystallizing my point of view on them," [Blumberg wrote](#) in 2004. "[That's] invaluable, but mostly for me."

### Unleashing Your Inner Blogger

Getting started in blogging doesn't always take an edict from on high or a firm resolution to blog. Sometimes it starts by accident. That's how GM vice chairman Bob Lutz came to blogging, [according](#) to marketing consultant Debbie Weil, who learned from Gary Grates, GM's vice president of communications for North America, that Bob Lutz started writing flying back from Europe when he wrote up a response to some posts he'd been reading about GM.

When Lutz asked what he should do with his notes, Grates had his blog-savvy communications team put [his writeup on the Saturn](#) into a blog template. The rest, as they say, is history—at least recent history. Grates says that there is no science to how or when Lutz blogs, but rather that he simply "juxtaposes his response to reader comments with what he wants to write about next."

Lutz himself gives advice to other CEOs on the whys and wherefores of blogging in his article from the July 11, 2005 issue of Information Week, "[Nothing to Fear from Executive Blogging](#)." "It's important that we run the bad with the good," he writes. "We'd take a credibility hit if we posted only rosy compliments, and credibility is the most important attribute a corporate blog can have. Once it's gone, your blog is meaningless. If you filter the negatives out, you don't have a true dialogue, so how can

Not every high-level executive, however, has a power blogger within, just waiting for the opportunity to engage the market in debate and express himself or herself online. It takes a combination of personality and proficiency, of wit and wisdom, and the ability to write well, to make a blogger—CEO or otherwise—worth reading.

CoreStreet's Libin was inspired and encouraged into blogging by [Chuck Tanowitz](#) of Schwartz Communications, who urged his client to join the blogosphere in 2003.

"What's right about Phil for blogging is that he's thoughtful, articulate, well spoken, and a great writer, which translates well to the medium of blogging," Tanowitz says. "His blog is not just a recap of company press releases and press materials—far from it. What he writes about in his posts are the things that Phil thinks about every day. His passion for the industry, his business smarts, and his personality are really what attracted our firm to the company when we started working with CoreStreet."

According to Tanowitz, Libin's enthusiasm for what he does—which comes across in his blog and in person—is something Tanowitz has leveraged for more traditional PR tactics as well.

"As public relations people, when we hear that passion from someone, that's what we need to capture and take back to the marketplace," Tanowitz says. "Blogging is the digital pencil. As Phil's PR counsel, we get a lot of ideas from reading Phil's blog at times when we're not in front of him. We get the thoughts he has while he's traveling in a far-off nation. His blog is a direct line into his head, and what Phil writes on his blog often extends to traditional PR and marketing channels—allowing us to repackaging his thoughts on a given topic and bring his ideas to the media in other forms. Often, something Phil's read or written sparks talks with analysts and journalists."

"I didn't think of this when I started blogging, but people usually Google me before a meeting, and by the time I meet with them at least one-quarter of them will have found my blog and read something there that they want to talk about," he says. "It's like a shared joke, something more personal that removes the pressure during for those first initial conversations. The basics about who you are have been taken care of on your blog."

### Blogging Is "Complementary To"—Not a "Replacement For"

Natural Logic's Gil Friend sees blogging as one of many communication pathways for his organization and its constituents. Friend, who has been online since the late 1970s, when he participated in EIES (the Electronic Information Exchange System), one of the early computer communications projects outside DARPA, puts blogging into perspective as a powerful tool for participating in the larger conversation.

"As a CEO, I write, speak and meet, and I see blogging as short-form writing that has its place in how I communicate," he says. "I do a longer monthly piece called ["The](#)

[New Bottom Line](#), regular pieces at [worldchanging](http://www.worldchanging.com) (<http://www.worldchanging.com>) and [GreenBiz](#), as well as articles for traditional media like [The Wall Street Journal](#). Blogging is more informal, and makes it easy to link other relevant items and bring people into the conversation. People can engage at their own pace and at their own convenience. And with RSS and blogrolls, reading blogs becomes even easier.

The conversation is the point, according to Friend. And the more dimensions to it, the better.

across the organization's lifecycle is the defining conversation the company has with itself and its value chain. And every organization has the opportunity to have this conversation, to make it broadly participatory, to make it rich, and to have it in all the forums where it can occur.

## CEO Blogging: Mischief or Management?

Because blogging is a continuously evolving medium, it is unpredictable. The risks of blogging—of being harassed in comments, embarrassed by errors and miscommunication, even being fired—have been well demonstrated in real-life scenarios for a few years now. Blogging's blemishes are worth examining, but not worth losing sleep over, according to executive bloggers with a passion for posting. With unpredictability comes risk, but it also brings edginess and excitement that connects with readers.

"Our executive team had meetings to decide if we should do it, how we should do it, and who should do it," says LiveVault's Bob Cramer. "We weighed the potential problems against the possible opportunities. In the end, we decided that the worst-case scenario was that we would learn from it. So we jumped in."

According to Cramer, the biggest risk for new executive bloggers is that they may expect too much from it.

"Blogging is about expressing yourself and how you feel—whether it's your market, industry trends, current events, or some other topic," he says. "It's not about selling product or writing a sales pitch. While I would urge every CEO to blog, I would also urge them to write about things they know about, to be personal, to understand that. What about encouraging employees to follow in his footsteps? Cramer says the more the merrier, as long as the work gets done."

"I think it would be great if our employees decided to blog, if they want to spend extra time conveying how they think and feel to the community."

[Karen Christensen](#), CEO of Great Barrington, Mass.-based [Berkshire Publishing Group](#), has identified the risks associated with blog publishing—and has some advice for overcoming them.

"Blogging requires consistency, which is why it's a good idea to test the waters without making an announcement or commitment before you find out if it's for you," she says. "It's not a blog if the last entry is a month old, so before you draw a lot of attention to your blog, make sure you can really do it."

Christensen also advises CEO bloggers to get personal while understanding that a certain level of decorum is necessary.

"We should be as relaxed and uncensored as we can, but also be aware that there are risks in publishing on the fly," she notes. "For example, I try not to share my wilder dreams and visions on the blog. And if you are one of those people who can't spell or see typos in your writing, get a proofreader or editor."

CoreStreet's Libin, who views his blog as a personal site, separate from his company, does not use corporate resources of any kind to design, host, maintain, or post to his blog. He also makes sure his blog has a separate graphical identity, saying that "this separation of church and state" gives him freedom to keep things humorous and "From an HR perspective, it's a personal blog, but I have to be appropriate," he says. "That's a little tricky, because it's easy to have what you write be misunderstood. Also, I find myself writing some humorous posts and I think, 'Do I want my investors to think that I'm funny? Does that make me frivolous? Is there a difference?' The truth is, yes there's a difference—and being funny and interesting is not a bad thing."

A little fear, in fact, may be a good thing, according to Natural Logic's Gil Friend, who notes that there's nothing wrong with fear.

"Fear is part of awareness," he explains. "Blind courage gets large numbers of people killed. So, be afraid and go ahead with the risks in mind."

Friend sees the opportunities for executive bloggers to develop a voice that customers, employees, and other stakeholders can relate to as an important benefit of blogging.

"Giving a voice to what can be a monolith is important because people do business out of relationships as much as they do it out of price, performance, and benefit," he says. "Blogging facilitates a dialogue about what matters to companies and communities—a discussion that often leads to a working relationship."

Because a key job for CEOs is to provide the core of the organization's identity and to ensure sustainability, a vital component of corporate identity is cohesiveness.

"One way that that the corporate voice can emerge is through blogging," he says. "The most interesting and powerful companies in the world are the ones who have

## The Cost Is Low, The ROI Is Coming

What is the return on investment for developing an identifiable, sustainable corporate voice? Even the most enthusiastic CEO bloggers will admit that they have yet to figure that out.

"In terms of ROI, I don't know what dollar value you can place on having people know me, know CoreStreet, and understand our values before we ever walk into a meeting," Phil Libin says. "But considering the number of meetings I attend, it could be pretty huge."

Libin advises, however, that blogging isn't for every executive.

"I would recommend blogging, but it depends on whether or not you have anything to say," he explains. "Blogging is not the only way to move the conversation forward. If you're good at golf, you have the golf course, but unfortunately I'm not. Blogging is my golf game."

Berkshire Group's Karen Christensen says all the ROI she needs to see is a positive response about her blog from her customers.

"Our customers, analysts, and press distributors, and they have told us that they appreciate a certain to know what goes on inside a publishing company," she explains.

## Blogs Power Convergence

If a fundamental job of a CEO is to be thinking ahead, can blogs help make that job easier? Is there a role in blogging for helping companies determine what the business wants to be not only in five years, but in 25 years?

"There are companies in Japan that have 500-year plans," Gil Friend says. "Because our business is about the intersection of economic and environmental sustainability, we ask our clients to tell the truth about what they aspire to. We ask them, 'What's your organization's purpose? What are your long-term commitment to your shareholders and employees and community? What's in your own heart? What are you really here to do?' And we ask this of CEOs, of senior executives, of everyone within the corporation. Typically, they say: 'Do you mean in my job? In my life? In my family? In my community?' And eventually they realize: 'Oh, you mean all of that?'—and then they get very quiet, and drop into authenticity. What follows is deep and genuine, and it is an extremely powerful conversation."

Friend and his company have seen first hand the tangible benefits that occur when the CEO and the company's mission, vision, business model, and value proposition are aligned. And, according to Friend, blogging can play a role in facilitating this authentic convergence.

"Providing multifaceted forums for participation and conversation enables more people within global organizations and communities to emerge and participate in ways that work for them. Blogging is just one way to facilitate this important goal—but it can be a powerful way." Perhaps it's GM's Bob Lutz' words of encouragement for executives considering whether or not to blog that will convince the more hesitant business leaders to get to their keyboard especially since the blog world, the press, and most of GM's constituents are tuned into Lutz's blog—which, he says, gets more than 5,000 visits and 13,000 page views a day.

"To any senior executive on the fence about starting a corporate blog, I have a word of advice," Lutz says. "Jump."

## Blogging Resources

The following list of blogging resources will help you learn more about blogging.

### About the Blogosphere

- Dave Sifry, CEO of Technorati - [The Growth of Blogs](#), March 2005
- CorporateBlogging.info - [Why Blog?](#)
- The New PR Wiki - [CEOs who are blogging](#). by countrv

### Business Blogging Policies and Guidelines

- General Motors - [General Motors Blogging Code of Ethics](#)
- IBM - [IBM's blogging guidelines](#)
- Yahoo - [Yahoo's Personal Blog Guidelines](#) [PDF]
- Hill & Knowlton - [H&K's blogging policies and guidelines](#)
- Plaxo - [Plaxo's Public Internet Communications Policy](#)
- Ray Ozzie (formerly of Groove Network) - The blogworld's [first blogging policies](#) were introduced by Groove Networks (now owned by Microsoft, where Ozzie is now CTO)
- Feedster - [Feedster's corporate blogging policy](#)
- San Francisco Chronicle - [Writing the Codes on Blogs—Companies Figure Out What's Okay and What's Not](#)
- Sun Microsystems - [Sun's policy on public discourse](#)

### Powerful Voices

- [Doc Searls](#) - Respected blogger, technologist, Linux expert, and cultural commentator. [Cluetrain Manifesto](#) co-author
- [Burningbird](#) - No stranger to controversy, Shelly Powers is a technologist, artisan, and early blogging pioneer
- [Lisa Williams](#) - Great information on blogging, RSS, and life

### Executive Voices

- [Bob Cramer's Blog](#) - CEO, LiveVault
- [Karen Christensen](#) - CEO, Berkshire Publishing
- [Gil Friend](#) - CEO, Natural Logic
- [Phil Libin](#) - President, CoreStreet
- [Matt Blumberg](#) - CEO, Return Path
- [Christopher Locke](#) - Highbeam's (and the blogosphere's first named) Chief Blogging Officer (CBO) and Cluetrain Manifesto co-author. Popular, often irreverent and offbeat.
- [Bob Lutz](#) - GM vice chairman's blog on the auto industry and related topics, called *GM FastLane*
- [Jonathan Schwartz](#) - Sun's president and CEO Jonathan Schwartz has become well known for his musings on industry trends, Sun's strategy, and criticisms of its rivals
- [Blog Maverick](#) - Home of Mark Cuban, outspoken owner of the NBA's Dallas Mavericks

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### About the Author

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