

SPECIAL REPORT

Blogs, Blogs, Everywhere A Blog Blog Nonprofits use Weblogs without buying the farm

By Jeff Jones

Leave it to Internet exuberance and technology buffs to make typing information about oneself or an organization and sharing it with people via the World Wide Web sound like the second coming of Bill Gates.

Yet, Weblogs, commonly known as blogs, are at their core just that — one's thoughts or an organization's communications — packaged in chronological journal entries, dated, titled and then posted for anyone with an Internet connection to read.

"It's like your diary on the Web that's public," said John Lorange, a technology consultant with San Francisco-based CompuMentor.

But it's more than that. Blogging returns the power to the people and in some cases gives nonprofits the opportunity to spread bits of information to their constituency in an informal manner.

"You can use this tool for your own ability to log what you're coming across on the Web as a knowledge management tool," Lorange said during a recent Alliance for Nonprofit Management (ANM) conference. "People also get to spin off from what you're doing. All of a sudden you have a public tool" that people can learn from and share with each other, he explained.

"Imagine if you could, in a half-hour, set up a way to have a voice to the world," said Cat Connor, founder of Blogathon, a fundraising event in which a collection of bloggers raise money for chosen charities during a 24-hour period. "That's the appeal. And it's really, really easy. It's given the power of mass communication to everyone with a computer."

While some blogs are nothing more than one person's musing regarding their latest trip to the refrigerator, or late night drunk talk, a few nonprofits are using them to build community among members and take their collective pulse. Others use it as a more informal way to communicate news bites and drive traffic to an organization's Web site.

In the case of the Blogathon (www.blogathon.org), or Project-Blog (www.project-blog.org), charities benefit from bloggers who raise money by finding sponsors and forgo-

ing sleep for 24 hours to post comments.

Bloggng is also cheap. Popular sites such as Blogger (www.blogger.com) allow people to create a blog quickly



and for free. Other options include downloadable software, such as Movable Type (www.movabletype.org), or TypePad (www.typepad.com), a service that charges a low monthly fee.

Brent Todd, who runs The Weblog Review (www.theweblogreview.com), said nonprofits could "flourish" in the blog scene if they used it to build excitement and publicize an upcoming fundraising event.

Todd added there's at least a few hundred blog-publishing tools available. He owns one of them, the Big Blog Tool (www.bigblogtool.com).

Before typing into the blogging phenomenon, nonprofits should think about what they're starting and what they want from the blog.

"One of the major problems that plagues blogs in general is a lack of focus," Todd said. "That's something we run into all the time."

Some sites have no point, and then you'll turn around and another site has a clear, defined focus that makes



you want to keep coming back, he said.

"Assess your real need for a blog," Connor said. "If you don't have new information on a regular basis, then you don't need a blog."

Marnie Webb, director of consulting services at CompuMentor, said blogs provide nonprofits "an incredibly easy way" to update their Web site. They also provide an opportunity to

activities, according to Jason Lefkowitz, manager of E-Activism.

"They can blog about whatever they want," said Lefkowitz, who presented at the ANM conference. "As long as it is not offensive, people are free to come and say we don't know what we're doing. We would rather they say that on our Web site, because we want to know if our members are upset, or if there are things we could

past, Oceana would have had to send out emails or perhaps wait until the scientist returned from the expedition and publish a report, or worse yet, never share the experience.

But this way, anyone could read *Jon's Journal* and find out, for instance, that on August 18, 2004:

"The previous evening's multi-beam mapping revealed an interesting structure on the adjacent Ely Seamount: a volcanic crater on the summit," Warrenchuk wrote in a post. "There's bound to be something of interest for both the geologists and the biologists on this unique seamount feature. The crater is sensationally dubbed 'the Caldera of Doom.' Why? Probably because we watched *Indiana Jones* on DVD the night before."

That brief entry is a good example of a blog's special appeal in that it relates serious findings and an informal anecdote about why the scientists named it what they did.

"We got a lot of feedback by email on his posts, and all of it was positive," Lefkowitz said in an email. "It went over very well. We actually even got a few requests to republish *Jon's Journal* in community newsletters and the like, which we were happy to give permission for, since it helps get out our name and what we're working on."

Attempts to reach Warrenchuk via email for his thoughts on the blogging experience were unsuccessful.

Which brings up another point. A blog is public record and could be quoted in the media without the author's knowledge.

Lefkowitz relayed during the conference that one of his blog entries was quoted in a national daily newspaper a few years back. He didn't

even know about it until friends called.

Still, Lefkowitz said that building a public record of commentary is one of blogging strengths.

Washington, D.C.-based OMB Watch, a government watchdog group, strikes a serious tone with its blog.

"Our Weblog tends not to be opinion and random thoughts," said John S. Irons, senior economic research and policy analyst and, of course, blogger. "I think ours is relatively focused on tax and budget. The way I use it for OMB is as a serious tool."

A blog also give Irons the ability to share bite-sized pieces of information, even if OMB Watch doesn't do a formal report on it.

For instance, the group linked to recently released U.S. Census Bureau information regarding income and poverty on its Weblog, gave a brief description of the findings and left it at that. The group also uses the blog to post information about reports its done, such as a recent report on nonprofit employment trends.

One challenge is to turn casual passers-by into people who return to the site, Irons said. "A Weblog provides a way to update a page all the time," so people keep coming back, Irons said.

Roughly 5,000 visitors went directly to the Weblog during August, Irons said.

"It's a different style of writing," Irons said. "It's a very useful style and it's not something you would want to do with a traditional Web page or article."

OMB Watch recently switched from using Movable Type software for its blog. After a Web site re-design, the watchdog group integrated the blog into its content management software, Irons said.

"We were able to use our technology person in-house to slightly mod-

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have a voice with their constituency and readers of their Web site, and have a "natural voice communication" rather than a more formal organizational voice.

Webb suggested that nonprofit employees who pass news articles around in the office are good candidates to run a Weblog.

One potential pitfall is that an organization loses some control as it expands the people who "talk" on its behalf, Webb said.

Nonprofits may be able to reduce that risk by previewing posts, but blogging protocol depends on an organization's internal policies.

Done right, a good blog creates an informal and easily updated communication tool that keeps people coming back for more.

One way Washington, D.C.-based Oceana uses its blog (community.oceana.org) is to build a sense of community among more than 170,000 activism members.

Oceana is an environmental group that "organizes campaigns dedicated to restoring and protecting the world's oceans through policy advocacy, science, law and public education," according to its Web site.

Oceana uses its blog as a clearinghouse for positive and negative feedback from members regarding its

be doing better to serve them. That's my job. I need to hear that, so I would rather hear that early than later. Having a tool like this, that lets them speak that way, benefits us."

Lefkowitz reviews comments before they are posted.

Oceana uses Scoop software (<http://scoop.kuro5hin.org/>) to run the blog, Lefkowitz said. The software allows people to rate each other's comments, he said.

Member comments provide Lefkowitz, who also posts to the site, vital reaction to Oceana's activities among the group's community at large.

"One of the things that makes this better than email is that you can watch and see if a thread is growing," he said. "If somebody floats something that is really spot-on about something you did wrong... and suddenly there's 48 comments hanging off it saying 'right on' you know something is happening. You know there is a nerve that has been hit."

A blog benefits Oceana in other ways, too.

This past August, Jon Warrenchuk, a marine biologist associated with Oceana, shared almost daily posts about an undersea exploration in the Gulf of Alaska.

One could imagine that in year's

HOW TO GET STARTED

Here's a few potential uses of a nonprofit blog culled from a session at a recent Alliance for Nonprofit Management conference.

Nonprofits could use blogs for:

- Knowledge sharing*
- Calls to action or fundraising*
- Media outreach*
- Tracking the propagation of ideas through the blogosphere
- Easily linking to other blogs of note
- Sharing personal stories about a nonprofit
- Communicating members' con-

cerns to the board

To set up a blog quickly and easily visit www.blogger.com.

For more information about blogging, visit the following links that were supplied by Marnie Webb, director of consulting services at San Francisco-based CompuMentor:

Weblogs for Nonprofits:
<http://www.techsoup.org/weblogsfor nonprofits/>
 Weblogs: Beyond the Hype
<http://www.techsoup.org/forums/index.cfm?fuseaction=read&forum=2008&id=54935&cid=117>

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ify what we were currently using," Irons said.

Then there's those independent bloggers who raise money for charities by blogging.

The Blogathon has been around since 2001 and has received pledges of roughly \$170,000 during its first three years (2001-2003), said Connor. In 2003, 400 bloggers participated in the event, she said.

Increased administrative demands were part of the reason the Blogathon took this year off. "What we've had to do is take some time off and look at doing greater automation and making things run more smoothly on the administration end," said Blogathon's Connor. She said that she is also working more closely with charities to make sure pledged donations are received. Roughly 70 percent of pledges are fol-

lowed through on, she estimated.

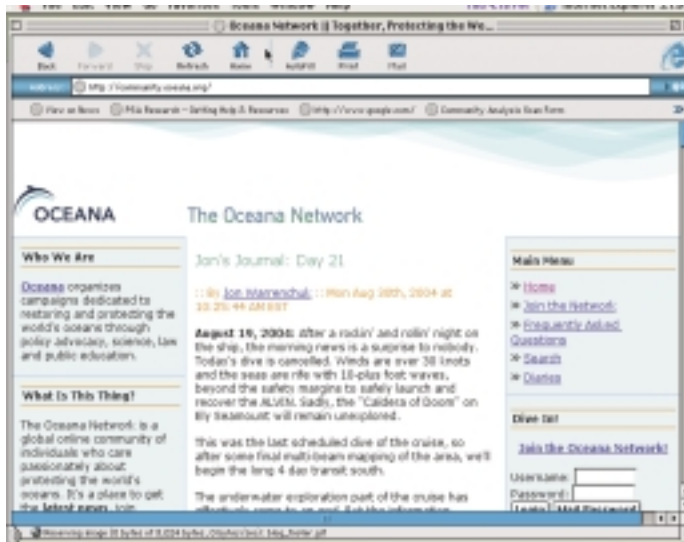
When news hit that this year's Blogathon was cancelled, a few people decided to hold a similar event with a different name.

Todd was one of the organizers of Project-Blog, a collection of 172 signed-up bloggers who posted every half hour for 24 hours beginning July 24 at 8 a.m. to raise money for 118 charities. The collective effort received pledges of \$25,661, Todd said.

Bloggers signed on to participate and got sponsors. When the event was planned, the blogger would tell sponsors how to donate to the chosen charities.

It was based on the honor system, Todd said.

As for the Blogathon, it will return next year. "We're really looking forward to 2005," Connor said. "We have big plans." *NPT*



Technology Trends in Philanthropy

By Tom Pope

Small organizations suffer from not being able to share in the tech tools that dominate the big business world—right? Well those were the old days, according to experts at the Technology Trends session in this year's FundRaising Day in New York 2004. The event was sponsored by the New York City chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

One major trend is recognizing that fundraising depends increasingly on recipients viewing email. "The current breed of prospect reads email before snail mail," said Jay B. Love, co-founder and CEO of eTapestry.com., a fundraising software company in Indianapolis, Ind. "Ask what is the first thing you do on reaching the office, even before checking voice mail or the post office."

Communication revolves around email, and relationship building online is a simple extension of the current offline effort. Online tools tie the email to relationship building, giving online, volunteer management, grant seeking, and planned giving because of database management.

"We're comparing regular relationship building to online cultivation," he said. "Teens are communicating online with instant messages or emails while they work on their computer."

Statistics show 204 million people have access to the Internet, according to Love, while the average person stays online 17 hours a month. In light of this, the speed of access of the Internet by society has soared. Radio took 20 years to reach 10 million users, and

television required 10 years. Yet, hotmail.com reached that number in 7 months.

"Potential donors are busy, yet they satisfy their interests on their schedule," he said. "They expect to find information online and want it to be

percent of nonprofits list email addresses for most supporters. As many as 64 percent do not collect email addresses on the site, and 75 percent can not survey their people online.

"While your goal is to get something from the viewer, the first step is

can join in an interactive community."

One nonprofit put together a major gift program. "The group witnessed a database that doubled, and in most cases the success came because of a synergistic effect by the communication strategies," Love said. "If email isn't one of the big tools for you, I predict that will be soon."

Technology is evolving now so smaller organizations can afford the benefits that used to be reserved for larger groups, said Ephriam Feig, Ph.D., CTO and chief marketing officer for Kintera, an Internet marketing firm in San Diego, Calif.

"Five years ago relationship management software was only affordable to the very wealthy at \$80 to \$100 thousand for five years, yet today small nonprofits can spend \$20,000 for similar tools," he said.

Feig pointed to a Forrester Research article on April 28, 2004, which stated that small and medium-size businesses plan to increase their IT spending for 2004 by 6.6 percent compared to 2003, compared with a 1.7 percent increase among larger companies. This size is usually defined as a business with fewer than 1,000 people.

Feig showed the difference from the old days when only part of an organization had access to certain contacts from outside the organization. Certain tools have the staff segmented, each one dealing with individuals from the external community. "But with relationship management, the whole organization can see a relationship with donors," he said. "Because an overlapping allows all

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"Type in your organization's name in Google.com to see where your group pops up."

-- JAY LOVE

personalized with a chance to give feedback."

If you build a site, will they come? Love explained that the site has to be simple. "Make sure people can find you," he said. "Type in your organization's name in Google.com to see where your group pops up, and if the position is low, you have to talk to your search engine."

However, despite the increasing numbers of people using the technology, the nonprofit world has yet to take advantage. Statistics from the 2002 Gilbert Group of Seattle survey of 900 nonprofits show that while 93 percent of Internet users access email, only 44

to gain information like the address, name, and background from them," he said. "The most important item is to get permission to communicate with the viewer."

See how other organizations design the site. Usually the viewer is offered a way to help the organization. Can they take something away from the site? Can they download some information or see a newsletter? Is there a way to participate in a golf tournament, or walk-athon?

"Most of the traffic to your site is driven by emails," he said. "You have to give a reason for coming to the site, and you have to keep it simple so they

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the staff to interact with the external community.”

The trend is to an interactive community where people are brought together through emails and direct mail while the site becomes more holistic. Nonprofits are demanding a holistic approach to tech where computers are not information silos, but are linked so each person in the staff can have an influence in a decision.

“The modern Web Site isn’t static,” he said. “It’s not just writers who cre-

ate content, it’s everyone because you may want the community to react to that content.”

After the first interaction, the goal becomes analyzing the new content. Up-to-date content has to be simple and constantly added by the community because they can provide fresh information. Yet the data is automatically captured in the database.

Information comes from people who participate and teams appear automatically, according to Feig. Reward them on personal pages of the site that lists an honor roll. Grassroots organiza-

tions that want to organize new people could have a password in a select section. “Ask specifics about the viewer,” he said. “You can learn about the person, and follow up for an annual campaign.”

Five years ago, organizations paid more money because of highly specialized tools. “Now the tools are becoming more affordable, and the future isn’t five years down the road,” he said. “It’s beginning today.”

However, the tech benefits have different costs from the usual perspective, according to Feig. Software has to

be seen as a service because you are paying for time and the connection of the tools. For example, data stored in the Internet is safe if handled through professional providers. Nonprofits benefit from economy of scale. But you have to seek out the best providers.

“Yesterday you waited half a year for the next release of custom features,” he said. “You now can find new specs delivered in a few days.” *NPT*

Tom Pope, a New York City-based journalist, writes about management issues.