

Blogging Applications



There is no hiding the fact that blogs and blogging have seen a gigantic increase in popularity in the past few years. For many, blogging and keeping up with the news by subscribing to Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds has become a new favorite pastime, far surpassing the need to email or text. But for business owners who are still plotting a blog strategy, the pleasure of blogging ends where the responsibility of setting up an effective blogging system and keeping a blog in sync with the marketing message begins.

But blogging for business and pleasure do not have to be mutually exclusive activities. Since I started writing this column I have visited an increasing number of photography-related business blogs that are poorly



Above: Jasmine Star's blog is styled like a fashion magazine. It shows attention to details and has charisma and style pouring out of every post. Capture taken from: www.jasminestarblog.com.

Left: Xanga Uploader is a free utility for Xanga blog users to upload multiple images at once. Additionally, it helps manage image tags and keywords for better searching and organization.

Opposite, top: Windows Live Writer is a free desktop blog-authoring application that offers WYSIWYG authoring and photo publishing capabilities, perfect for creating offline posts. It can be used to publish many types of blogs.

Opposite, bottom: Xanga's Web interface for customizing a blog's look and feel is clutter free and easy to use. Capture taken from: www.xanga.com.

designed, lacking a consistency of style and are missing some of the most important features that blogs have to offer their readers. The majority of photographers do not take advantage of blogging's best practices because they either don't know of them or simply don't care. This month I'll address the former need by filling in some gaps in your blogging strategy to help you to get your blog up to a respectable standard. If you are in the later camp, I hope to motivate you to action by seeing precisely how blogging affects your bottom line.

Do I Have To?

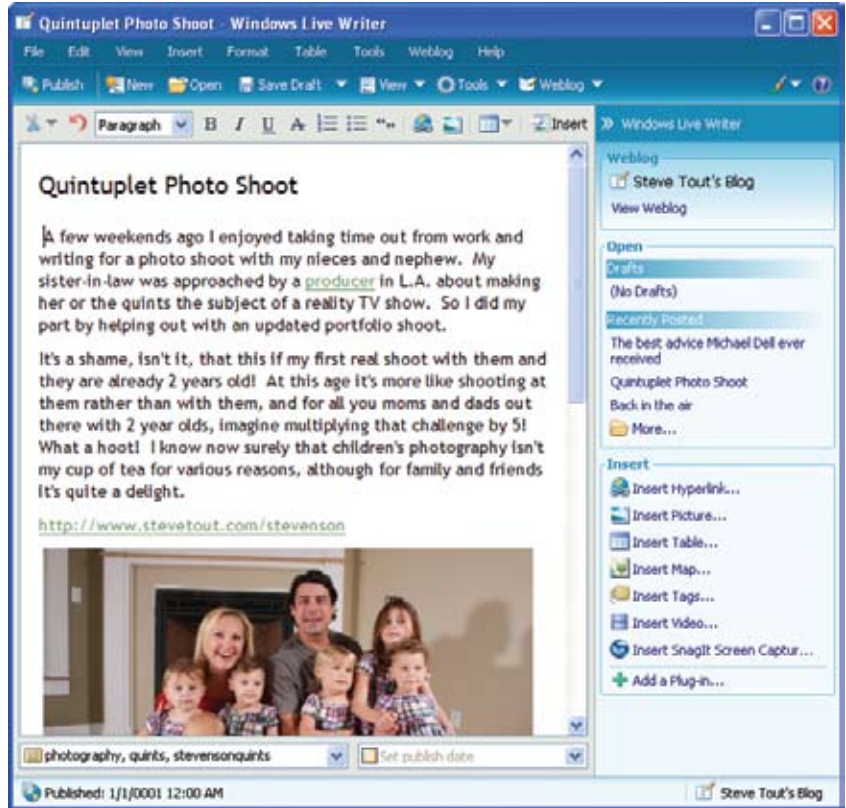
Like email, blogging has helped companies of all sizes improve the effectiveness of their sales and marketing efforts. Whenever I encounter photographers who question whether or not they should blog, I hear the sarcastic voice in the back of my head saying, "Well, of course you don't have to (blog), but..." Blogging is one of the best ways to inexpensively and more efficiently (than via email) stay in front of your prospective customers and fulfill the objective of creating preference for your brand. And unlike mailing lists, those who read your blog are likely already highly qualified potential customers and can browse with delight without fighting their way through a cesspool of spam.

Furthermore, blogging creates a window into the soul of a business. As much as photographers possess extraordinary talent, it is the responsibility of the business owner to demonstrate a likable personality and an ethos that is calibrated to the style your customers are looking for. Blogging, when viewed through the glasses of lifestyle marketing, consistently demonstrates those personal and artistic qualities and goes even further to show that the photographer can produce results that are consistent with what is being advertised on the main website.

Setting Up a Blog

Many blog applications can be set up in minutes. TypePad, the oldest and largest paid blogging service, provides its users with basic blogging and customization capabilities in addition to offering a robust, Web-based platform for content management. TypePad (www.typepad.com) uses its own publishing system called Movable Type, which forms the foundation for many custom designed blogs on the Web today. TypePad blogs are available from entry level with the point-click publishing capabilities to enterprise class blogs and everything in between.

Other popular blogging sites like Blogger.com, WordPress.com (hosted edition) or Xanga.com also provide instant publishing and easy account setup. The trade-off for free versions of Blogger, Xanga and other such blogging apps are that they are paid for by advertising. So free blogging apps are not particularly well suited for business use. Xanga in particular



Left Module (?)

Border

Color: ACBD5A [edit](#) - [transparent](#)

Style: solid 2 pixel(s) wide

Title

Background: F5F5F5 [edit](#) - [transparent](#)

Text: 525252 [edit](#)

Alignment: left

Interior

Background: F5F5F5 [edit](#) - [transparent](#)

Text: 525252 [edit](#)

Alignment: left

Left Module Title

Left Module Interior

Here's how the text inside your left modules will look

Music (?)

Music: [\(?\) test music](#) - [clear](#)

Loop Music: no, play it just once

No music will play when people visit your Xanga.

Search Bar and Trim (?)

Show Search Bar ▼

Border: ACBD5A [edit](#) - [transparent](#)

Interior: F5F5F5 [edit](#) - [transparent](#)

Trim: C2C2C2 [edit](#) - [transparent](#)

Search bar preview:

Trim preview:

Custom Module (?)

Custom Module is a Xanga Premium Feature.

FAVORITE PHOTOS



MOST COMMENTED POSTS

- 32: Ashley & Nate - Engagement
- 30: Alisa and Kevin Enjoying Some Hershey Kisses
- 27: Nothing lasts forever
- 26: Oh yeah! More excitement! A new Wiebner BLOG!
- 23: Angela and Kurt - May 10th
- 22: Park fun with Layla, Crystal and John
- 22: Proving us right...Alison and Robin's Wedding!
- 20: A 4th of July Wedding - Randi and Ben!
- 19: 100 Degrees + An Ice Cream Truck = Amy & Kyle's Wedding!
- 19: Can u guess?

Do you like to have fun? We do, especially with our photos. We wanted something a little different than the average blog out there, so along with our super talented Blog designer we came up with a Favorites section - or "Wiebner Favies" as we like to call it. What is it you ask? [more »](#)



offers a premium service account that can be used to remove their advertisements from your blog.

Have it Hosted or Install it Myself?

WordPress is another competing blogging platform that offers both hosted and installable versions of its blog. One of the benefits of installing the WordPress blog on your own website is that you do not have to pay recurring monthly fees on top of existing Web services you already pay for. Some hosts may already have WordPress available on their network, with setup just a click away (like my host, Host MySite.com, does). Another considerable benefit (besides being free) is that there are no hassles to set up the blog using your own domain, which can add a lot of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) value to your blog with little extra effort.

On the other hand, if your Web host provider doesn't already have it available on its network, you will need to download the installation files from WordPress.org and FTP them to your site. If your Web host doesn't offer to assist you with setup, you won't have to look very far to find someone who can help you.

Customization Adds Credibility

Like your website, your blog will require additional customization to have the appearance of a business blog.

Product or service differentiation is not complete without adding the customizations necessary to your blog to integrate it into an overall marketing and communication strategy.

Most every blogging platform will offer some form of Web-based customization that is easily accessible to the end user. Styles can be applied using a theme editor, or custom styles can be created with a color picker in "What You See is What You Get" (WYSIWYG) mode. These styles allow the user to change backgrounds, fonts, font sizes and colors, border sizes and colors, and also include sections to use your own code, such as Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) and JavaScript.

Where HTML is a markup language that describes the structure of a Web page, CSS is complementary to HTML in that it describes the style properties used within a website to give a consistent, uniform look and feel. Together they form the basic building blocks for customizing any website or blog.

Customization can also be accomplished by adding widgets (e.g. polls, social bookmarks, tweets, etc.), custom headers and footers that are graphic or JavaScript heavy and even code for monitoring traffic and usage to your blog.

Content and Community

Once your blog has been customized and branded to your liking, you will spend

Above: Joel and Rita Wiebner's blog is a custom design from Infinet Design, with community being built around a photo rating and comment system. Capture taken from: www.thewiebners.com/blog.cfm.

a lot of time creating and managing content for blog posts. As photographers, managing and displaying our photography through blogs and forums can become a time sink. To ease the burden of getting your images online, some unique tools exist to upload multiple images from a standalone app that runs outside of the Web browser. This greatly simplifies the process of uploading, and works great as it can be run in the background while you write or publish your blog. The same utilities exist for creating and publishing blog posts as well, which is perfect if you ever blog offline while traveling, for example.

Another important and interesting feature of blogging is the ability to build a community by allowing users to comment on blog posts, and even the photos you upload. Often, the guest or user-contributed content can add as much value to the conversation as the original post does. Imagine the delight of your prospective customers who see an entire collection of highly rated images, measured by ratings made by other users. If shameless self-promotion isn't your cup of tea, photo ratings and comments could be the perfect feature for your blog.



Above: Into The Darkroom created this custom blog for Boutwell Studio. It features rich colors and textures, and a custom Flash blog show that saves bandwidth, space and creates interactivity. Capture taken from: boutwellstudio.com/blog.

Getting The Word Out

Blogs have nearly replaced email for sharing information with customers and peers and, in my experience, they have

made getting personalized content much easier. While some still prefer to read blogs directly on a website, a very cool technology called RSS can be used to aggregate

a bunch of blogs into an inbox, akin to reading email. You may find your blog being read by RSS readers like Google Reader, and your daily rants and photos being compared to the top photographers in your market by agents or prospective customers.

When blogs are loaded into a blog reader, it makes reading items of historical interest easy, fast and enlightening. Make your RSS feed one of the most visible elements of your blog. What good is your blog if people read it only once? Others may subscribe to your blog and then share your post with those who subscribe to their blog. Your blog posts can travel far and wide very quickly, so avoid perpetuating gossip and own the opportunity to create your own online community and show your very best work to the world.

On the occasion where blogging may not seem like the appropriate outlet for your life as a photographer, you can let your buyers and prospective customers into your inner circle by tweeting, which appears as a flash headline on your website. Twitter (www.twitter.com) has recently become a popular tool for sharing personal moments with your community, like "Eating lunch with Bob from Microsoft's Rich Media Group" or "Bought a new Canon 85mm f/1.2 today, it rocks!" to help keep a dialogue open and interesting. If you think it's just a trend, consider that Oracle Corporation has a Twitter and tweets frequently about product announcements, updates and events.

There are many more valuable tools and techniques that cannot be included here due to space, but I will discuss them in my own blog from time to time. On the other hand, the value in blogging isn't derived from the number of cool gadgets or the amount of bling. Success in blogging (as in most everything) usually boils down to a mastery of the basics, executed extremely well over time. It's never too late to get started, and it's always important to have fun doing it.

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