

THE MARKETING BLOG COMPETITION – TAKING MARKETING BLOGGING TO THE NEXT LEVEL: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH OF TEACHING SOFT AND HARD SKILLS IN AN ONLINE MARKETING COURSE

Sven Tuzovic

Pacific Lutheran University

Abstract

Previous research has focused on the idea of implementing educational blogging in the marketing curriculum. For example, Kaplan, Piskin and Bol (2010) describe the adaptation of blogging as part of a Marketing Management course. While the authors focus mainly on soft skills, including written communication and coherent expression, the question arises how technology can be integrated to teach students also relevant hard skills in the context of online marketing. This paper outlines a semester-long marketing blog competition, in which students had to (1) create and maintain a marketing blog and (2) apply a bundle of technological tools to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators. The project design, assessment criteria and student feedback will be discussed.

Introduction

As marketing educators we are faced with the challenge of equipping students with various professional competencies and preparing them “to be productive employees who can communicate effectively, work well in teams and (...) demonstrate content knowledge” (Parsons and Lepkowska-White 2009, p. 154). Academics have often been accused of emphasizing marketing theory instead of bridging the gap between theoretical marketing principles and ‘real-world’ practice (de los Santos and Jensen, 1985). As a result, several scholars have declared students being ill-prepared for a career in the marketing profession (Day 1979; Ostheimer 1977; Peters 1980). Others point out that “(...) the lecture format is not the most effective educational delivery mechanism, particularly in marketing” (Helms, Mayo and Baxter 2003, p. 18). Active learning methods are alternatively recommended in which students are empowered to think and learn for themselves (Johnson, Johnson and Smith 1991). Literature on education and learning advocates in particular experiential learning (e.g. Gremler et al. 2000; Navarro 2008) which refers to an interactive teaching style with new roles for teacher and students (Simpson and

Pham 2007). As employers increasingly expect that graduates also have advanced information-technology skills, marketing educators have adopted technology and the Internet as instructional media (c.f. Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010).

Course Context

The course titled *e-Marketing* (also referred to as Internet Marketing, Online Marketing) is an elective for the Marketing concentration at my institution. The objective is to introduce students to the Internet and other online and mobile technologies for marketing purposes, in particular the planning, design and execution of marketing strategies and programs. Since technology and the Internet are changing rapidly and new trends have been emerging (e.g. social media marketing, blog marketing, online public relations, etc.), I decided to integrate an innovative approach in the course for building and improving necessary marketing skills: The *Marketing Blog Competition* was comprised of an individual component (blog writing as part of small team of bloggers) as well as a group component (tracking and optimizing the team's blog performance). The idea of implementing educational blogging originated from an article in the *Journal of Marketing Education* by Kaplan, Piskin and Bol (2010) in which they describe the adaption of blogging as part of a Marketing Management course. While the authors focus mainly on soft skills, including written communication and coherent expression, I decided to add a second component, a group competition, in which students had to apply a bundle of technological tools to analyze, manage and improve their blog performance based on key performance indicators (KPIs).

Marketing Blog Competition

Project design

As part of this course teams of three students set up a marketing blog on the platform *Blogger.com* and posted several blog entries during the semester. After signing up an account, each team had to create a URL and blog name. Students needed to consider that the name could not be changed and that the URL would be permanent. Blog posts were allowed on any topic that was relevant to marketing and, in particular, online marketing. The syllabus included the following examples: advertising campaigns, TV commercials, new products, company acquisitions, a service experience, or changes in personal consumption preferences; however students were allowed to make their own suggestions. Students were told to focus on websites, ad campaigns such as display advertising, articles from other marketing bloggers, etc. In other

words, virtually any topic did fit as long it exhibited a link to marketing theory or practice (c.f. Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010). In addition, each student was required to set up an account on *Google Reader*, a news reader, to manage blog subscriptions of all group blogs as well as five required marketing blogs (SearchEngineWatch, The Social Media Marketing Blog, Marketing Pilgrim, Online Marketing Blog and ProBlogger). Links to those blogs had to be added on each team's own blog site as well. In addition, teams were required to create an introductory post, which included a hyperlink to an outside resource (e.g. the University) and a second introductory post that explained the purpose of the blog, being a part of this course project. The *purpose* was twofold: First, students had to follow and read professional marketing blogs enhancing their marketing knowledge and critical thinking skills. Secondly, following each other blogs in class was supposed to engage students more meaningfully in this project.

Individual work requirements

Each student had to individually post a minimum of one blog entry every two weeks throughout the semester. The purpose was both to ensure a minimum number of writing assignments for the semester and to maintain a balance with other class projects and assignments. The timeframe also seemed appropriate to compare blogging frequency among teams. That is, teams were supposed to develop a schedule that would demonstrate a strategic approach of frequent updates. In addition to writing blog entries, everyone was required to comment at least twice on blog postings from the 'required blogs' as well as blog postings submitted by classmates, with thoughtful responses to the posted blog entries. Each student was also responsible for responding to the comments posted by classmates (and others who may have commented). If students commented on external blogs they had to provide the blog URL to me. Thus, there were a number of occasions for students to apply their skills of written communication and coherent expression.

Group competition

The second project component dealt with monitoring and improving blog performance. Each group had to create an account on *Google Analytics* to analyze their blog traffic over the semester. Students had to apply textbook and classroom material such as website and blog design, search engine optimization (SEO), web analytics, etc. For example, teams had to identify and monitor key metrics and then, on a weekly basis, submit Google Analytics reports (both in Excel and pdf). At the end of the semester, all teams had to prepare a presentation summarizing their blog strategy and content, the creativity of their blog design (that is, the

number/type of widgets and plugins for sharing content on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.), and the overall performance based on various KPIs such as pageviews, visits, unique visitors, average time on site, keywords and referrals. To make the project even more compelling, I created a competition. The team with the most successful blog at the end of the semester, based on my evaluation together with two external judges, received a certificate of accomplishment and a financial award (gift cards to be redeemed at the bookstore) from the Dean of the School of Business.

Project Assessment

At the beginning of the project, students were told that blog writing would be different from homework because all posts would become public and accessible online (Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010). Therefore, it was expected that students had to post well-structured arguments that clearly explain an issue relevant to marketing and which were in compliance with grammatical and spelling rules. Students were graded individually on:

- The quality of the posts (relevance of the entry to marketing, writing style, etc.),
- The frequency of the posts,
- The links provided within the posts,
- Presentation of material in their blog,
- Quality of commenting (responses to others, etc.).

Group grades were determined on overall blog performance which consisted of five criteria:

- *Blog structure*: choice of blog URL, use of meta tags, information about blog contributors, display of “about blog”, use of widgets and plugins (e.g. “subscribe to” button, buttons to share on Facebook and Twitter, Facebook plugin),
- *Blog design*: overall layout of blog, aesthetics of blog site, use of background and colors, font type/size;
- *Blog strategy*: clarity of blog subjects, identified target audience, reliable frequency of blog posts, team contributions, integration with Facebook page (if available);
- *Blog content*: consistency of blog posts with blog strategy, marketing relevance of blog posts, number of spelling and writing errors, quantity and quality of links and videos incorporated in each blog post;
- *Key metrics and blog analytics*:

- *Based on Blogger Stats*: number of followers, total pageviews, highest number of pageviews in a month, highest pageviews per blog topic, referrals from Facebook and Google.com;
- *Based on Google Analytics*: visits since blog launch, average visits per day, total pageviews, unique visitors, average time on site, bounce rate, loyalty (percentage of 1 time visitors versus return visitors, traffic from search engines and referring sites, most popular keywords).

Table 1 summarizes the performance data of each blog (see end of paper).

The data shows that team 4 created the most successful blog over the semester. One of the judges summarized the performance based on the content strategy and the design: “Good interesting concept that I want/need to know more about. Good information. Worth reading. [...] Simple design but it communicates and integrates well with the theme of the blog.” The team achieved by far the highest number of total pageviews (according to statistics both from Blogger and Google Analytics), the highest number of pageviews per blog topic and the most referrals from Google.com. Based on the data from Google Analytics, the team also had highest number of unique visitors; more than three times compared to the next team (749 vs. 250). Bounce rates were mostly quite high across all teams (more than 60%). This was expected since the bounce rate is higher in general for blogs. Teams 5 and 6 are showing lower bounce rates; however, those teams did not manage to track data for the whole semester. Teams 1 and 4 also achieved to gain visits via popular keywords on search engines. For example, one student of team 4 was posting a story titled “Duped by a Teacup Pig” discussing how the website Koofers, a college study network, was using a picture of a teacup pig in miniature rain boots on Facebook to increase traffic. The keyword ‘teacup pig’ then led to 23 visits to the team’s blog story. In conclusion, the panel of judges agreed that team 4 was the winner of this blog competition.

Student Feedback

At the end of the course I conducted a short online survey (based on Kaplan, Piskin and Bol 2010) to determine student satisfaction since formal course evaluations were not immediately available to me. Responses indicate that the course blog competition has been extremely successful.

Student comments to the question “What factors attracted you to the blog project? What did you like or enjoy?” include:

“I really liked writing about topics that I was interested in. It was fun to see that I was able to blog successfully, and know that I could do this again in the future.”

“I liked how it was different than any other project I have done in college. It was interactive and really forced me to learn and apply the information in class to our client project.”

“I enjoyed the hands on experience rather than listening to a lecture. I enjoyed learning how to blog and implementing SEO strategies.”

“I enjoyed this blog project because it made it more relevant to real world business scenarios.”

Student comments to the question “How did your participation in the blog project improve your knowledge about online marketing?” include:

“By using Google Analytics and Facebook marketing, I learned how to better promote myself and whatever I am engaged in the future. This exponentially improved my knowledge about online marketing, considering I knew nothing about online marketing.”

“My participating in the blog, by having to read other blogs and it improved my knowledge of how companies use blogs for marketing for their business and how I can use this in the career world after I graduate.”

“It improved my knowledge of SEO and how to use meta-tags in html. I really enjoyed learning how to implement Google Analytics and how to analyze it. Google Analytics was my favorite part!”

“It improved dramatically because it forced me to focus on materials from the readings and apply those learnings to the blog.”

“It allowed me to learn more about Google Analytics and linking blogs to Social Media.”

Conclusion

Based on the feedback, students seemed to have enjoyed this real-life project and have gained important learning outcomes of reflective and analytical thinking, written and oral communication, self-directed learning, teamwork dynamics, and the use of cutting-edge technology. 19 of 24 agreed or completely agreed that they improved their skills of using web

technologies throughout the project, and that the project increased their attention to the course in general. 18 of 24 agreed or completely agreed that, as a learning experience, the project was more productive than listening to a lecture. Overall, this project demonstrates how marketing blogging can be integrated with web analytics as an innovative pedagogical tool to build and enhance students' soft skills and hard skills for real-world business scenarios in the context of online marketing.

Table 1: Comparison of blog performance

Blog Team	Blog 1	Blog 2	Blog 3	Blog 4	Blog 5	Blog 6	Blog 7	Blog 8
Blog Name	Public Propaganda	Mobile Mkt and Tech.	Dream Team Analytics	Surviving Social Media Jungle	CHEERS!	Soft Drinks and Beauty Products	Selling Point: Commercial Explorers	They shoot, They score
Blogger Stats								
Number of followers	13	10	9	11	9	9	8	8
Total pageviews	1395	433	477	2,142	764	555	430	259
Highest number of pageviews in a month	598	138	187	1,253	423	192	164	22
Highest pageviews per blog topic	96	21	25	265	113	19	63	22
Referrals from Facebook	302	1	63	17	217	13	59	60
Referrals from Google.com	58	32	29	627	18	47	45	59
Google Analytics Stats								
Visits since beginning	648	219	290	1,119	166	123	318	189
Avg visits per day	7.62	2.58	3.41	13.16	1.95	1.45	3.74	2.22
Total pageviews	1,339	508	689	1,527	481	537	713	525
Unique visitors	250	56	64	749	95	42	118	86
Avg time on site	03:15	03:00	04:07	01:04	01:57	06:12	05:16	02:58
Bounce rate	63%	65%	60%	68%	51%	21%	65%	69%
Loyalty: 1 times (%)	37%	25%	22%	67%	57%	34%	37%	44%
Traffic search engines	6%	11%	1%	5%	0%	2%	6%	8%
Traffic referring sites	75%	66%	96%	78%	93%	87%	87%	69%
Search/Keywords	37 visits via 26 keywords	25 visits via 11 keywords	4 visits via 6 keywords	59 visits via 23 keywords	0 visits	3 visits via 3 keywords	21 visits via 10 keywords	15 visits via 10 keywords