The Basics of Blogging

In an increasingly digital age, cost-effective Internet marketing strategies are on the rise, and you don’t need to be a technology expert to take advantage of these opportunities. Blogging has emerged as an innovative marketing tool for psychologists, but it remains a resource untapped by most practitioners.

This article provides information about creating and using a blog as part of your overall marketing strategy.

What’s a Blog?

A blog is an online journal. Bloggers use their blogs to state opinions, post information or commentary, articulate ideas and share links to other resources. Viewable to others, blogs are typically set up in an interactive format that encourages readers to post their comments below each entry. As you blog, your most recent entries are displayed at the top of the Web page. To keep the information organized, older entries are archived by date or topic. Although they are primarily text-based, blogs may feature photographs, videos and audio clips. You can set up a blog in minutes and, if used correctly, it can be a powerful, low-cost (or even free) marketing tool.

Why Blog?

In addition to functioning as a mechanism for providing public education and sharing a psychologist’s expertise with the community, blogs can help shape your professional image, increase your online presence, establish your status as an expert and offer potential clients and referral sources a glimpse of who you are and the value your services can provide. Blogging is an easy-to-use, flexible way to supplement your broader marketing strategy. Used in conjunction with a Web site, a frequently updated blog can boost your Web traffic and provide the personal touch you might not relay through your Web site alone.

The frequent posts and common linking associated with blogs make it more likely that your information will come up on search engines and be seen not only by avid bloggers but also by the casual Web surfer. Although delving into the often daunting world of technology may seem intimidating, blogs offer a simple and cost-effective way to reach a new generation of clients for whom blogs and podcasts are second nature.
Getting Started

Before starting your own blog, get your feet wet by using Google Blog Search, Technorati or another blog search engine to find existing blogs that interest you and learn from them. Blogs come in all shapes and sizes, so get a sense of which ones pique your interest and why. What writing style do you find most engaging? What length and format are easiest to read? What topics seem to generate the most comments from readers? Keeping up with all of the blogs you’re interested in can be very time-consuming, as they are often updated frequently. Rather than visiting the Web page for each blog every time you want to check for new postings, consider the time-saving approach of subscribing to the blogs you want to follow.

Blogs typically contain “feeds,” which may be listed as RSS, XML, Atom or web feeds (look for a square, orange button and/or a link to subscribe on the page). Regardless of which format is used, a feed provides a way for the blog to push updated content to you, rather than your searching for it. You can use a feed reader or aggregator, such as Google Reader, Bloglines, or NewsGator to subscribe to blogs, or add blogs to the Feeds section of Internet Explorer’s Favorites Center. If you have an iGoogle homepage, you can even have Google Reader on the page as a gadget, so any new blog posts are right at your fingertips.

Once you’ve identified blogs that capture your interest and gotten the feel of the format, start posting comments to blog entries and sharing your expertise. When you leave comments, be sure to include a signature line with your name and the URL of your Web site. This will help increase traffic to your site and encourage others to link back to you, which can improve your search engine rankings and make it easier for people to find you online.

After familiarizing yourself with blogging and getting a little experience under your belt by posting some comments, explore the options for your own blog and get started. A number of Web sites offer free blogging services, which allow you to quickly set up a blog. Examples include Blogger, WordPress and LiveJournal. Although these free services are typically robust and flexible enough for most bloggers, those who need more advanced features and are willing to spend some money can explore paid blogging providers such as TypePad and Moveable Type.

Blogging in Practice

Once you have set up your blog, it’s important to update it with short, informal entries at least several times a month, if not weekly. The more timely and relevant your blog entries, the more interest and traffic you will receive. A variety of formats lend themselves to blog posts, including topical summaries, quick tips, short anecdotes, commentary on current issues and descriptions of and links to additional sources for information. The idea is to keep the material fresh to keep readers coming back.

If you have professional expertise in particular areas, post frequently about those topics. You can begin by creating entries that you think would be of interest to your existing and potential clients. For example, if you provide couple’s therapy, the morning a new research study is released on the benefits of marital therapy you might familiarize yourself with the study and post a review of the article on your blog, including links to the study and other relevant resources. By blogging, you can help people find information they can use to make well-informed decisions about how and when they might benefit from seeking psychological services. You also establish yourself as an expert and demonstrate that you stay up-to-date on the latest research in your area of practice.

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Notably though, there is no roadmap or guide on how one should blog. It is up to the individual psychologist to determine how best to use this technology in a way that can promote his or her particular practice, so blog away!

Proceed with Caution

It is important to remember that the same ethical obligations of client privacy and confidentiality you observe in your other professional activities apply when you’re blogging. In fact, the easy access and worldwide audience associated with material broadcast on the Internet magnifies such considerations. Additionally, be sure to carefully consider the implications that any personal information you disclose may have on those to whom you provide services. As with any professional communication, take care to avoid statements that could be viewed as fraudulent. Err on the conservative side and consult with your colleagues if you question whether certain content or tone is appropriate.

EXAMPLES OF BLOGS

http://drdeborahserani.blogspot.com
Dr. Deborah Serani’s Psychological Perspectives Blog

http://www.phwa.org/blog
The Psychologically Healthy Workplace Program’s Good Company Blog

http://psychcentral.com/blog
PsychCentral’s World of Psychology Blog

http://scienceblogs.com/cognitivedaily
Cognitive Daily Blog

NOTE: The Web resources noted in this article are offered as examples and do not constitute endorsements by the APA Practice Organization.