Blogging into Book Markets

by Richard Hoy

At a conference in New York City in June, 2003—the first formal conference ever on the subject of blogging— panelists at a roundtable discussion were asked the inevitable question: "What is a blog?" A huge argument ensued because no one could agree on a single definition.

While even the experts can't agree on what a blog is, everyone agrees that blogs are fueling something significant. I mean, geez, even ex-presidential candidates have blogs (*HowardDean.com*).

So what is a blog? For purposes of this article, I'm defining a blog as a running commentary on a subject, presented in "diary" format, made possible through special software that makes publishing the commentary on the Internet easy and quick.

The fastest way to get your brain around the definition above is by seeing some examples:

- Instapundit *(instapundit.com)*
- Boing Boing Blog *(boingboing.net)*
- Slashdot *(slashdot.org)*

These three blogs each probably have more readers that a mid-sized city's daily newspaper. In fact, Slashdot has so many readers that it can cause the "Slashdot Effect." That's when so many Slashdot readers are trying to access a Web site mentioned in the publication at the same time that it causes the site to crash.

These three blogs, and others like them, built major readerships with just some clever prose and a little technology—really something anyone, say maybe even an author, can do.

Blogging Services & Software

There are lots of blogging services as well as software packages. For example, Salon has a popular service (*salon.com/blogs*) as does BlogSpot, now owed by Google, (*blogger.com/ blogspot-admin/*) and also Radio Userland (*http://radio.userland.com/*). My personal favorite is MovableType (*movabletype.org*), a software package that now also comes as a service called TypePad (*typepad.com*).

My company, Booklocker.com, is a self-publishing services company. We offer independent authors a cost-effective way to get their books into the marketplace. I installed MovableType on our server and offered blogs to some of the authors using our service. We chose MovableType because it's very easy for our authors to enter the commentary they want to publish without having to see the ugly technical back-end that makes it work.

Real Simple Syndication (RSS)

Another important dimension to blogs is Real Simple Syndication (RSS). RSS is a way to format information so it can be easily shared between Web sites. Essentially, RSS is a special file that contains summaries of the most recent updates on a Web site. Having these summaries out there in a universal format (specifically, a format called XML) means that if a piece of software looks at your RSS file, it receives a list of summaries and links to the most recent content changes on your Web site.

Since RSS data is in a standard format, sharing that data with other Web sites is a simple exercise. For example, using RSS I can take the last three entries from one of our author's blogs and automatically put them on the book's sales page—creating cross-promotion between blog and book.

A more dramatic example of the power of RSS is Feedster (*feedster.com*). It's a search engine driven entirely by RSS feeds. Feedster basically monitors all the RSS feeds submitted to it, looking for changes. When Feedster detects a change, it sucks down the content associated with the change into its database. People can then use Feedster to search for new content on specified sites.

RSS was available way before blogs. But it wasn't until blogs came along that RSS took off. Most blog software and services automatically create an RSS feed, hence the link between the success of blogs and RSS.

Practical Applications for Authors and Publishers

So let's put it all together and see what blogs and RSS mean for authors and publishers. An obvious application for authors and publishers is to create their own content using blog technology. I can tell you from tests here at Booklocker.com that blogs do sell books. But the trick is that the content has to be well-written and published frequently. There is nothing worse that a stale blog. And it often takes at least a few months before one can build a readership. Some of the more successful blogs we have at Booklocker.com are:

- Emergency Divorce Handbook For Women (*angelahoy.com/ book*)
- Tim Leffel's Cheapest Destinations (*http://blogs.booklocker.com/ travel*)
- Kim Davis' Daily Dance on the Edge of Normal (*http://blogs. booklocker.com/KPDavis*)

Another application that isn't so obvious is using RSS to monitor content on other blogs for opportunities to plug a book. If you go to Feedster and plug in some search terms, you'll get back all the blog posts that reference those terms, including the date and time they were first published. Monitoring on a daily basis helps you find opportunities to inject your own commentary (many blogs allow readers to post comments on a topic).

Additional Resources

- Blogging: Genius Strategies for Instant Web Content, by Biz Stone (Pearson, 2002, ISBN: 0735712999)
- Lockergnome's RSS Resource *http://rss.lockergnome.com/*

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Richard Hoy and his wife, author Angela Adair-Hoy, are the proprietors of Booklocker.com, Inc.—*a company that provides a low-cost, turn-key publishing and sales environment for independent authors—and* Writers Weekly.com, *an email newsletter and web site that reaches more than 40,000 writers each month.*