

THESIS

WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE BLOGOSPHERE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF  
HOW CONSUMERS AND COMPANIES USE WEBLOGS IN THE MARKETING  
AND COMMUNICATION PROCESS

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## ABSTRACT

### WHAT IS GOING ON IN THE BLOGOSPHERE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOW CONSUMERS AND COMPANIES USE WEBLOGS IN THE MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION PROCESS

In the past few years weblogs have become a major channel for publishing content over the Internet. With the popularity of social media as a medium to communicate with consumers, companies around the world have started using weblogs as part of their communication strategy. However there remains a void of literature on company blogging, and users still do not have a solid understanding of how and why both consumers and companies are using this tool. This is an exploratory study into the world of company blogging, and it aims to add some insight as to what is going on in the blogosphere.

Qualitative interviews were conducted with participants representing both the company and consumer perspective. The results indicate that although some companies believe having a blog is important, this belief is based more on blind faith in the medium than actual measurable data. The companies studied showed that their blogging strategy was very casual and the actual benefits to the company or consumer needs were not taken into account. From the consumer perspective, blogs were viewed as a tool to gather information and a place where a consumer would hopefully receive some sort of value for their time. More research needs to be done on why companies are utilizing this tool as well as why consumers are following company blogs to possibly determine a better way for companies to engage consumers through the medium.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER

I: ABSTRACT.....	ii
II: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
III: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Introduction to Blogging.....	1
The Internet & Online Marketing.....	3
Research Project Goals.....	5
IV: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Definition of a Blog.....	8
Prior Findings about the Blogosphere.....	10
Theoretical Background.....	13
V: METHODOLOGY.....	19
Research Methodology.....	19
Data Collection.....	19
Sampling.....	23
Specific Cases.....	27
Analysis & Interpretation.....	28
Reliability & Validity.....	29
Limits & Protection of Subjects.....	31
VI: RESULTS.....	33

Company Results.....	34
Other Company Findings.....	36
Consumer Results.....	39
Other Consumer Findings.....	40
 VII: DISCUSSION.....	 42
Limitations.....	45
Implications.....	48
 VIII: CONCLUSION & SUMMARY.....	 53
 IX: REFERENCES.....	 54
 X: APPENDICES	
A: INTERVIEW GUIDE – COMPANY.....	61
B: INTERVIEW GUIDE – CONSUMER.....	64
C: COMPANY INVITATION – EMAIL.....	66
D: CONSUMER INVITATION – BLOG POST.....	69
E: PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE.....	71
F: RESEARCH QUESTION RESULTS.....	73

## INTRODUCTION

### **Introduction to Blogging**

The mediasphere is “the collective ecology of the world media” (Catalano, 2007, p. 247) and encompasses everything from traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and television, to newer media like the Internet and websites. As newer media tools are being developed, companies and marketers are taking advantage of these resources to reach their audience in new ways. Weblogs, more commonly known as “blogs,” are one of those many new tools and have become a way for people to be able to post anything they desire on the Internet.

Simply stated, “blogs are a diary or journal maintained on the Internet by one or more authors or contributors” (Catalano, 2007, p. 248). Blogs can take many different forms and encompass any topic imaginable, from personal to political, from business to religion. Blogs can provide product support and are a gateway for ushering new ideas into the public domain. The authors are called bloggers, and the community in which blogs exist is called the blogosphere. According to *BlogPulse*, as of January 2012 there were over 182 million blogs online (BlogPulse, 2012), up from the July 2005 estimate of 70 million by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2005). These numbers are just estimates however, coming from primarily manual counts; most blogging platforms do not disclose the exact number of blogs they host so a totally accurate estimate is difficult to obtain. Regardless of the specific number, the blogosphere is massive, growing; over 99 thousand blogs added to the blogosphere in the last 24 hours alone (BlogPulse, 2012), and global.

Blogs are an extension of websites, and have become commonplace because the majority run on a simple and free format, are easy to use and can be highly interactive. Websites are traditionally passive and static; blogs are multi-dimensional, dynamic, and contain collective intelligence (Catalano, 2007). Collective intelligence refers to the idea that the thoughts and ideas within a blog can come from many authors as opposed to just one, creating a wealthier body of knowledge about a specific topic (O'Reilly, 2005). Blogs help, through dialogue, to create a human connection which is accepted by consumers and feels more authentic than the traditional flow of communication (Hill, 2005). A 2007 Nielsen survey reported that 66 percent of North American consumers trust blogs as a source of product information (Chafkin et al., 2008). Blogs can be an integral part of a marketing or communication plan, allowing a closer connection between a business and the consumer, a channel for feedback or dialogue, and a location for customer support. The goal is to create an ongoing conversation with consumers instead of the more traditional one-to-many communication models of the past.

Audiences today are fragmented due to niche programming. There are multiple media channels from radio and print, to television and the Internet that cater to specific topics or demographics, and no real single channel that engages the masses. Marketing and communications strategies need to adjust in order to reach the individual. The de-massification of communication is leading to very specialized marketing campaigns specifically aimed at the individual. Blogging is a tool used in computer-mediated communication that not only allows consumers to learn about companies and products from other consumers, but also allows users to interact directly and create dialogue with other consumers and companies alike. This allows consumers to ask more questions

about products and ideas, as well as discuss the benefits or value of a company or product with others that are familiar with it. With over 182 million blogs online as of 2012 (BlogPulse, 2012), this method of communication is becoming mainstream, and consumers are beginning to view blogs as a valid source of product information (Andersson, Blomkvist, Holmberg, Sasinovskaya, 2007; Banning, & Sweetser, 2007, Hill, 2005).

### **The Internet & Online Marketing**

“Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (Marketing Power, 2007). Marketing, in other words, is the creation, implementation, and selling of a product or idea, with the intent to acquire and retain consumers. Traditionally, marketing efforts relied on mainstream media channels such as television, radio, newspapers, billboards, direct mail, trade shows, and magazines to reach the consumer. Marketing was company-based and product oriented, with a one-to-many communications model that centered on “McCarthy’s 4P’s” of marketing; product, price, placement, and promotion (McCarthy, 1960).

Today, however, a new marketing model is being developed due to the introduction and prevalence of the Internet. This new model is not only one-to-many, but also many-to-many, many-to-one, and one-to-one. This new style of marketing involves more dialogue between company and consumer, and promotes feedback from the public.



This flexibility between sender and receiver roles has allowed marketers more freedom to effectively reach their desired audiences in innovative and unique ways.

There are two primary goals of new media marketing (Berkley, 2007). First is the push to allow the consumer to take control of media and content by creating dialogue with the company as well as other consumers. The second goal is to reach a specifically targeted audience at a precise moment in time. According to the Internet World Stats Web Site (Miniwatts, 2011), as of March 31<sup>st</sup> 2011 almost 2.1 billion, or 30.2 percent of people worldwide were using the Internet. With Internet usage growing at a rate of 480.4 percent over the last 10 years (Miniwatts, 2011), the Internet has become a major channel of communication for people around the globe.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project sought to find out what these millions of people were doing online and discovered, among other things, that an overwhelming majority (79 percent) of all American adults aged 18 and over go online, spending time mainly on email, search engines, health and news related sites, and buying products (Zickuhr, 2010). The study found that 66 percent of all American adults online used the Internet to purchase products; the highest percentages of online shoppers are adults between the ages of 18 and 64 (Zickuhr, 2010). About two thirds of Americans that have access to the Internet claim that they have purchased a product online (Horrigan, 2008). A report from BizReport and Forrester Research said the total number of online sales in the U.S. in 2009 reached \$155.2 billion, an 11 percent raise from 2008 and by 2011 that number would crest \$191 billion, making online sales over 7% of total US retail sales (Schonfeld, 2010). The report claimed that in a recession where money is

tight, the Internet provides a better shopping environment where consumers can price-check, as well as save money by shopping from home.

With online sales becoming a massive sector of the economy, businesses need to take notice of new marketing models being developed and begin to use the new tools, such as weblogs and social networking sites, in order to compete in this global society. One specific tool this exploratory study will investigate is the use of weblogs, and how consumers are using them not only to research products and services but also to connect and create dialogue with other consumers as well as companies themselves.

### **Research Project Goals**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to gain an understanding of how and why consumers and companies use blogs as a channel to disseminate as well as seek information and discuss products, ideas and services. The end goal of this study is to develop a model for companies that use or plan to use blogs as a method of communications between them and their publics.

This study aims to provide a better understanding of the image or perception consumers have of blogs as a marketing tool used by companies, and how those blogs cultivate that image. The results will also provide insight into whether or not blogs can be an effective way to market a product or service, provide customer support and information, and to cultivate brand loyalty. The results may provide ideas as to how companies can make better use of blogs as a marketing and communications tool using uses and gratifications theoretical framework. However, as a purely exploratory inquiry into the topic these anticipations are hopeful at best.

This study will explore the importance of communication through the use of new media in a company's marketing plan, specifically how companies are using blogs to create a dialogue between themselves and their public. The study seeks to understand how companies and consumers use blogs to communicate as well as influence attitudes and opinions about the companies themselves and the products or services they offer. The goal is to compare the differences in both the company and the consumer perspective of motivations, anticipated benefits, and the realized benefits of using a blog. Anticipated benefits are the benefits that bloggers perceive or expect from engaging in blogging. The anticipated benefits are the motivation to become active, and lead to a need hopefully being gratified by that action. Realized benefits are the tangible results from using the blog. These may be related to the anticipated results or they may be different.

It is important to look at both the perspectives of the consumer and the company to better understand the motivations behind either party's use of blogs. By focusing on both parties, the resulting data should allow companies to use their blogs more efficiently and effectively in getting consumers the information they seek. The results of this study will contribute to the literature and suggest strategies for how companies can use blogs as a marketing tool to communicate with consumers about the company and their products and services. This study will explore four main research questions:

RQ1: What are the anticipated benefits of having a corporate blog by a company or business?

RQ2: What are the anticipated benefits of using a corporate blog by a company's publics or consumers?

RQ3: What are the realized benefits for a company from having a corporate blog?

RQ4: What are the realized benefits for a company's publics or consumers from using a company's blog?

Exploring the research questions will lead to a better understanding of how consumers use blogs to find out about products, services, and companies, and why or how blogging cultivates a specific image or view of a product, service, or company in the consumer's eyes. Discovering how consumers and companies use blogs will perhaps indicate if businesses can use blogs effectively as a marketing tool to communicate with consumers. The results from this study may also lead to the development of a strategy for businesses to implement blogs to further promote their company and create an ongoing dialogue with the public.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Definition of a Blog

McKenna (1992) states that there has been a “fundamental shift in the role and purpose of marketing: from manipulation of the customer to genuine customer involvement; from telling and selling to communicating and sharing knowledge; from last-in-line function to corporate-credibility champion” (p. 4). Blogs and other newer forms of communication tools have become part of the corporate marketing world. New marketing tools such as blogs, viral marketing, word of mouth or buzz marketing, and even virtual communities provide consumers more information and choices than conventional marketing methods. These new communication models are built around a more customer-centered approach.

It is important to differentiate between blogs, discussion forums, and websites. Blogs and discussion forums are very similar in that users can post comments as well as read and react to others' comments and so develop dialogue. Both blogs and discussion forums may or may not be moderated. Discussion forums are a highly structured index of topics or categories within which are comments, usually organized in chronological order (Hobson, 2004). To post comments, users need to register with the forum and log in. Users can also communicate directly with other forum members online through private messaging.

Blogs, however are collections of posts or articles that may be very specific or about a variety of different topics. Blog posts are somewhat structured in that they are usually posted in reverse chronological order so the newest information appears at the top of the page. Posting of new content is the rationale for a blog but commenting on posts,

although a benefit, is not the primary reason for a blog's existence, a significant difference between blogs and discussion forums. Blogs can also connect a post to content on other blogs or websites easily through links, and content can be syndicated or directly sent to the blog's users. Syndication allows users to get frequent updates usually through e-mail, in real time, about new content being posted on the blog.

A website is “a connected group of pages on the World Wide Web regarded as a single entity, usually maintained by one person or organization and devoted to a single topic or several closely related topics” (Dictionary.com, 2009). A key difference between a website and a blog is that websites are typically more static and less frequently changed or updated, while blogs are dynamic and designed to be continually changing or updated. Good blogs are updated daily if not several times throughout the day. The communication model of a website is typically one-way and one-to-many, while blogs are more of a two-way symmetrical model and many-to-many by allowing direct feedback from the blogs' readers that is accessible to everyone for viewing.

There are two general forms of blogs, the diary blog and the collaborative blog. A diary blog is simply a blog about a specific person's life and the events that are occurring that the author deems noteworthy (Andersson, et al., 2007). Diary blogs allow an author to express his/her views and opinions on any topic he/she sees as important. The second kind of blog is the collaborative blog, which tends to have several authors as opposed to a diary blog's single author. Readers of collaborative blogs can contribute to the blog with their ideas and opinions, as well as add links to other relevant information. The purpose of a collaborative blog is to create discussion and to gain input from a larger number of participants among the readers. Collaborative blogs are usually designed

around a specific topic and can be accessed by anyone. A corporate blog is an extension of a collaborative blog that provides users with important updates on products and services offered by a company, insight into a company's principals and standards, and promotes a company's image by allowing a direct channel of communication between the consumer and the company itself (Andersson et al., 2007).

Corporate blogs can be the link between a consumer and a company. Corporate bloggers are people who blog in an official or semi-official capacity with a company, or are affiliated with a company even though they may not officially be spokespeople for the company. Corporate bloggers engage in dialogue with customers and clients, promote and defend the company's image, and help promote their products. Corporate bloggers should not hide information from the consumers or embellish about their company or its products and services, because once they lose their credibility and trust in the consumer's eyes they may never get it back. However, corporate bloggers do want to promote their company by shedding positive light into the blogosphere (Lee, Hwang, Lee, 2006; Manjoo, 2002).

### **Prior Findings about the Blogosphere**

One study found that although diary and collaborative blogs are both used by consumers to find information about a specific topic, collaborative blogs were viewed as more beneficial than diary blogs because there are more authors and therefore more diversified information (Andersson et al., 2007). Participants in that study used blogs during every stage of the consumer decision making process: from developing a need for new products, searching for information about the product, comparing similar products

and their attributes to one another, purchasing the product, and confirming the purchase decision. Overall, participants found collaborative blogs to be the most useful in every stage of the decision making process because the content was well-defined and targeted.

Andersson et al., (2007) did find that participants used company blogs in the knowledge and persuasion stage, but did not trust the sources during the purchase or decision stage. Participants used company blogs to obtain factual information about a product, but leaned towards considering other consumer's opinions to reach the decision stage. That study explored the importance of opinion leaders (bloggers who had continuous up to date information concerning a topic) versus opinion formers (marketing oriented bloggers clearly associated with a company or organization). Although the participants trusted opinion leaders over opinion formers, none of the participants questioned the opinion leaders as to their affiliation or non-affiliation with any specific company or organization.

A study by Hill (2005) examined how small businesses were using blogs as a marketing and communications tool, and found the biggest strength of blogs was in establishing dialogue with the consumers. The study found that almost all the participants (small businesses) indicated that blogging was not primarily a sales vehicle but rather a means to create and foster relationships. Participants in the study said blogs gave their companies a "human voice" and personality that a generic website could not. Many of the participants said they were using the blog as a public relations tool; these small businesses, with limited resources, were able to disseminate information cheaply to consumers as well as the media. The study's participants also indicated their blogs generated a significant amount of traffic to their company websites. Another reason the



participants liked blogging was that the initial cost to the company was considerably lower than other marketing and communication tools such as television commercials or print ads. Most blogging software is free, and other than the amount of time invested and access to the Internet, there are no real barriers to blogging. Even though the financial return on investment was difficult to measure, nearly all the participants believed their blogs were benefiting their company.

A main reason why consumers used blogs was the availability of up-to-date information on a specific topic and the ability to communicate directly with the company as well as other consumers (Andersson et al., 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008). Businesses were using blogs to build goodwill and customer support, generate leads, improve customer relationships and open up new lines of communication (Hill, 2005; Berkley, 2007). Blogs can enhance and promote a businesses brand, can be used to recruit competent employees, and can play a big part in a public relations role (Scott, 2007; Lee et al. 2006; Horton, 2003). Some companies are starting to use blogs internally as well, as a way to keep in touch with employees and help to spread information about company happenings (Lee et al., 2006). Joshua Allen, Microsoft's first employee blogger, has said, "Small businesses need blogs even more than big ones, because they live off relationships, and blogs build relationships very effectively" (Hill, 2005, p. 3). More specifically, blogs help to establish and maintain that intimate person-to-person relationship, whether between blog writer and consumer or consumer and consumer, and foster the consumer's perception that companies are not the big faceless corporations that most think them to be.

Andersson et al. (2007) and Hill's (2005) studies confirmed what other research has also found: blogs have the potential to be effective marketing and communications tools. The versatility of blogs, their relationship building attributes, and clearly targeted information is what draws both consumers and businesses to them. A blog's ability to open channels of communication and create relationships with consumers is the attribute most businesses recognized as the biggest benefit (Hill, 2005). Authenticity, honesty, transparency, and openness are words that consumers and businesses associated with company blogs, compared to more traditional websites or communication channels (Hill, 2005). The biggest problems for businesses is a lack of time to blog, the lack of basic skills such as technical writing, and an unwillingness to invest financial resources into honing those skills (Hill, 2005).

Overall, the studies discussed above showed that blogs could be an effective marketing and communication tool, provided businesses did not expect immediate financial return or overtly try to sell their products and services. Hill (2005) asked participants about the return on investment (ROI) that the companies saw from their blogs, and although an exact dollar amount was difficult to calculate, participants felt that their blogs were either creating contacts for future business or as least creating goodwill toward their company; both were seen as benefits even if they did not directly equate into dollars and cents.

### **Theoretical Background**

Within in the past two decades, new communication technologies have been developed that are changing the very notion of mass communications. The uses of the

Internet has led to the construction of new communications models and theories, as well as revived old theories which are being re-tested and re-examined in the light of the new medium. Uses and gratifications theory has, in the past, played an important role in examining any new communication technology. As newspapers, radio, and television appeared on the radar of social science researchers, the uses and gratifications theory was used to try and understand an audiences' reasons behind consumption. The same is happening now with the evolving nature of and interaction between the Internet and its users. As researchers move forward, the uses and gratifications model needs to be adapted to the new technology to help explore and understand how audiences are using these new media.

In the beginning researchers believed that media was all powerful and had a direct and immediate influence upon a docile audience. As research began to be conducted on media effects, scholars looked at mass communications from the communicator's, or sender's, perspective. By the 1940's the notion that media had direct influence had faded and a new era of theories on media effects was ushered in. However, researchers were still viewing the communications process from the role of the communicator. As researchers became more knowledgeable, the idea that audiences decide what messages they want to consume brought about the idea of uses and gratifications, which looked at communications from the point of view of the audience or receiver.

Over the past 60 years the uses and gratifications paradigm has been applied to countless new theories and media. Since Herzog, Lazarsfeld and others promoted the idea that audiences are active, gratifications seeking beings (Baran & Davis, 2006), instead of merely passive lumps sitting around being easily manipulated, the uses and

gratifications theory has been utilized to help understand exactly what audiences are using media for and why. Schramm asked back in 1954 how people select the messages they want to hear; he found that people weigh the rewards they expect against the amount of effort they must expend to receive those rewards. In other words, consumers make decisions based on some expectation of having some need or want met (Baran & Davis, 2006).

With new technologies come new needs and new gratifications, as well as new paths to seek out those needs and gratifications. The Internet has brought with it new sources of information that users previously did not have access to, not only filling a void for those wanting specific information, but also creating a need for people that now have become interested in obtaining new or different information. As uses and gratifications theory poses that different people can use the same medium for very different purposes (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005), the flexibility of the Internet to provide gratifications for diverse audiences makes it a perfect subject to research. New technologies are allowing participants to create relationships and communities by connecting people from all over the globe, for whatever their personal purposes or needs may be, bringing together people with common interests whom otherwise would never have had the chance to create dialogue. The advantage of these technologies is that every person can use them as they wish, for their purposes alone, to seek their individual gratifications, yet together create meaning for themselves and others through dialogue and community that previously may not have existed (Ruggiero, 2000).

With the introduction of a new technology or a new medium, media effects researchers quickly try to understand how the technology is used and its potential effects

on audiences (Ebersole, 2000). Over the decades, uses and gratifications research has been at the forefront to understanding new technologies, from newspapers to radio to television, and now to the Internet (Ruggiero, 2000).

The Internet provides users with the selectivity needed to personalize the information they receive to meet their individual needs (Ruggiero, 2000). A prime example is when someone buys a magazine at a newsstand they are confronted immediately with multiple options; however, when someone goes to an online magazine they tend to navigate straight to the magazine of their choice and may never see the rest of the choices. De-massification, which refers to the control a user has over a medium and a message, is related to uses and gratifications theory by allowing the users to find the specific information they seek to satisfy their need more selectively, and disregard the rest. Blogs are a perfect example of this, allowing users to not only find the specific information they seek, but also to mold the medium through dialogue with other users to help produce the information they are looking for.

Given the multifaceted aspects of blogging and its interactive nature, the user-level approach that uses and gratifications researchers take in examining an audience's use of new technology is appropriate. Since individual users essentially control the communications process by simply deciding to be online or not, uses and gratifications provides a theoretical framework to help understand the reasons that bring users to the online marketplace at all (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). Uses and gratifications proposes two generally accepted reasons for using a medium. First, that people use a medium for its content, and second, that they use it simply for the experience of using the medium. In the case of blogs, users then may be motivated by specific information that

they seek, or simply by the browsing process (Stafford et al., 2004). Stafford et al. state that initial studies of the Internet by uses and gratifications researchers found that users are primarily more motivated and gratified by content rather than simply browsing, or “surfing” as it is commonly known. Knowledge about how consumers are using blogs can provide insight to businesses to enable them to better serve their audiences. It is important to study how people are using and interacting with new communication technologies to gain a better understanding of how these technologies affect lives, which is why a fresh look at audiences uses and gratifications of blogs could be of value (Stafford et al., 2004).

Media research today also takes a deeper look at the psychology behind people’s needs and their motivations to satisfy those needs. Social cognitive theory claims that interactions with the environment (the media environment in this case) help to reform expectations about outcomes of future media consumption and in turn influence media exposure (LaRose, Mastro, & Eastin, 2001). This leads to Bandura’s (1977) idea of self-efficacy, or one’s belief in one’s capability to have the ability to take a course of action. The idea is that users who perceive themselves as proficient in a certain task will exert more effort to be successful at that task. An example is a blog reader that has a specific need, and believes they know how to find the information that will lead to the gratification they seek, will in turn go out and find the information required by using the tools at hand, in this case, blogs. Unlike prior media where users do not need any complex skills to navigate, such as the television or radio, self-efficacy is an important variable when analyzing a user’s conceptions of an interactive medium that is as complex and ever-changing as blogs. Using uses and gratifications and social cognitive theory and

ideas like Bandura's self efficacy model to help guide the researcher, there should be proficient amounts of theoretical background to help the researcher explore and better understand the data this study will hopefully produce.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Methodology**

This study examined blogs only and the purpose was to discern the anticipated and real benefits of the participants regarding corporate blogs. The most effective way to explore the research questions was through qualitative research, which “relies on the analysis of visual and verbal data that reflect everyday experiences” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). As Weiss (1994) states, there are seven research aims that justify qualitative methods, three of which are: developing detailed descriptions, integrating multiple perspectives, and describing a process. This study used these three aims to gain insight into how both companies and consumers are using corporate blogs.

Qualitative research follows the interpretative paradigm where the researcher is an important part of the research itself, and without the researcher’s input and active participation little data would exist. The qualitative method allows the researcher to change and adjust the research methods as the research evolves, which is an important aspect of this study since the discovery process may provide the researcher with new paths to explore. Mason (2002) said about qualitative research:

If you choose qualitative interviewing it may be because your ontological position suggests that people’s knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which your research questions are designed to explore. Perhaps more importantly, you will be interested in their perceptions (p. 63).

### **Data Collection**



A qualitative in-depth interview method allowed the researcher to delve into the thoughts of the participants and attach meaning to their experiences (Andersson et al., 2007). Participants answered questions about prior blogging experience, which were recorded for later review. Since perceptions and attitudes were typically non-standardized from participant to participant, qualitative in-depth interviewing allowed for a better understanding, through respondent elaboration, of how users on both the consumer and company side interact with and use blogs to gather, diffuse, and share information. The biggest advantage to this method was the wealth of detail that it provided the researcher on the topic (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). The interviews were unstructured or open-ended; the difference between structured and unstructured interviews being:

The former (structured) aims at capturing precise data of a codeable nature in order to explain behavior within pre-established categories, whereas the latter (unstructured) is used in an attempt to understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 56).

Unstructured interviews allowed the researcher to explore general topics as well as branch out into other interesting ideas as the interview progressed. Fontana & Frey (1998) paraphrased Douglas (1985) by stating that unstructured interviews “take place in the largely situational everyday world of members of society. Thus interviewing and interviewers must necessarily be creative, forget how-to rules, and adapt themselves to the ever-changing situations they face” (p. 62).

Paget (1983) states, “what distinguishes in-depth interviewing is that the answers given continually inform the evolving conversations. Knowledge thus accumulates with many turns at talk” (p. 78). For this study, the purpose of using in-depth interviews was to understand the participants’ experience and perspective through stories, accounts and explanations. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state, “researchers usually select persons for interviews only if their experience is central to the research problem in some way” (p. 173). They define stories as “narratives that shape human experience in terms of context, action, and intentionality” (p. 173); accounts as “excuses or justifications of social conduct” (p. 173); and explanations as “how they apply what they know in certain areas of their lives, how they negotiate certain issues, how they moved from one stage of their lives to another, how they interpret certain texts, and so on” (p. 174). It is these stories, accounts, and explanations that this researcher hoped to understand through the use of in-depth interviews.

The interviews were both informant and respondent interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Participants from the three respective businesses were informant interviews, where information was gathered about the experience of authoring the company’s blog. The respondent interviews took place with the participating public and were more concerned with their feelings and thoughts regarding the use of a company’s blog. The designated time and date of these interviews was decided upon by the participants themselves, to insure a relaxed atmosphere where there was no sense of urgency to finish the interview.

The interviews were conducted over an Internet instant messaging service, such as AIM, Google Chat, or Facebook chat, both to save resources by not having to travel to

interviewee locations, as some or most interviewees were not local to the researcher's location, as well as to insure accuracy of the transcription process since these messaging services record the conversations in real time. These services allow for instantaneous synchronous conversation, so the interviews would have similar flow to an in-person face-to-face conversation. Also, by having word-for-word verbatim transcripts for later retrieval the data was more accessible for analysis. Although there is the argument that transcription lends the researcher to think more in-depth about the data that has been collected, the additional time freed up by not having to transcribe the interviews, as well as the precise accuracy of the transcripts, allowed the researcher to expend more time and focus on the coding of that data.

Throughout the process an interview guide (Appendices A p. 61 & B p. 64) was used to keep the interview flowing and on track. An interview guide is flexible in how and when questions are asked and allows the interview to travel down unexpected paths (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The strength of the interview guide is that it, "allows multiple means to achieve a study's goals, whereas an interview schedule stresses standardization of the method" (p. 195). The interviews needed to stay flexible since, "most qualitative interviews are designed to have a fluid and flexible structure, and to allow researcher and interviewee to develop unexpected themes" (Mason, 2002, p. 62). Primary interviews were done over Internet instant messaging, with secondary interviews conducted through email when needed to clarify or follow up with participants.

The interview guide was designed with specific questions in mind, to try to help understand the motivations behind using a blog and the gratifications participants hoped to receive from their use. Some of the questions were influenced by the questions asked

in previous studies by Andersson et al. (2007) and Hill (2005); however, the majority were developed by the researcher, and based on the main research questions of the study. The goal to better understand why business and consumers participate in company blogs was achieved through a set of simple yet logical questions about the reasons behind and the benefits to blogging. A guide helped the researcher to keep the conversation on topics that were pertinent to the study and when needed were flexible enough to allow new questions and thoughts to enter into the conversation.

There was a debriefing by the researcher after each interview to allow participants to review their responses to the interview questions and to clarify any confusion that came up. Since the participants' identity was known to this researcher, the study promised confidentiality to participants and there was no way to publicly connect participants to their responses. Participants could choose to decline participation at any time and all identifying marks were deleted for any use of the data by anyone other than the original researcher. The researcher is certified through the Institutional Review Board to assure safe and fair treatment of all participants.

## **Sampling**

The original target sample size was nine subjects, with the opportunity to interview additional participants as seen necessary for collecting additional data. The researcher chose the number nine because plans to interview the blog authors from each of three companies, as well as two consumers that follow each company's blog. The expectation was that nine interviews would produce a large enough body of data to

provide answers to the research questions, while remaining manageable in terms of time and resources. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state:

We sample persons, settings, activities, and so on until a critical threshold of interpretive competence has been reached – when, for example, we cease to be surprised by what we observe or we notice that our concepts and propositions are not disconfirmed as we continue to add new data (p. 129).

In qualitative research it is not unusual to have a sample size as small as one, or as large as hundreds or thousands. Projects that study specific interests where it may be difficult to recruit participants may have more of a justification in having smaller sample sizes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This is relevant because there was no compensation for participating in this study, which made it difficult to recruit participants. The number of participants for this sample was decided upon by reviewing similar research. Hill's (2005) study on small business bloggers had 15 participants, which created over 70 pages of rich data to be analyzed. Andersson et al. (2007) selected nine participants for in-depth interviews, with the reasoning that, "we do not intend to generalize our findings; instead we want to seek an understanding of our research participants" (p. 22). Huberman and Miles (1998) believe that, "the issue is not so much the quest for conventional generalizability, but rather an understanding of the conditions under which a particular finding appears and operates: how, where, when, and why it carries on as it does" (p. 204).

The sampling strategy this study utilized was purposive sampling. A purposive sample is a sample deliberately chosen to be representative of a specific population where subjects are selected for specific qualities and eliminates those who fail to meet the

predetermined criteria (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). As Schwandt (1997) stated, “sites or cases are chosen because there may be good reason to believe that ‘what goes on there’ is critical to understanding some process or concept, or to testing or elaborating some established theory” (p. 128). The criteria of sample selection then must flow logically from the objectives of the project (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Although this type of sampling does not incorporate every element of a population, the goals of this study were not to generalize to the larger population, but rather explain how in specific cases blogs were being used. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state:

This (generalization) is not considered to be a problem in interpretive social science for two reasons: (1) qualitative studies do not produce data that can be subjected to statistical procedures that allow generalization to a population; and (2) qualitative studies focus on the social practices and meanings of people in a specific historical or cultural context (p. 122).

Since this study was interested in the attitudes and perceptions of people who blog, only bloggers were chosen as participants. Three companies with blogs were chosen and the respective person at each company in charge of their blog was contacted about participating in the study through e-mail (Appendix C, p. 66). Volunteers from the public were also asked to participate by posting an announcement on the company’s blog (Appendix D, p. 69). Both groups were given a pre-interview questionnaire (Appendix E, p. 71) to help prepare the interviewees for the conversation that occurred during the interviews, yet were not meant to steer or push the interviewees toward any assumptions or conclusions about the study.

Consumer volunteers were the main focus from the end-user side of the study, so the volunteers had to meet a predetermined criterion of what the study is calling a “power blogger.” Power bloggers were defined by the level of issue involvement and the frequency of active use of a blog (Nohil, JiYeon, & Jung Ho, 2008). Grunig’s (1983) situational theory of publics can also be used to define power bloggers. The theory considers the levels of activeness of communication behavior of a public. Grunig (1989) believes that active communicators are more likely to have an attitude about a situation, and in turn will more often engage in a behavior to interact with that situation. The reason the study sought these “power bloggers” was because it hoped to seek and understand the opinions and insight of people consistently involved in interacting with these specific company’s blogs, rather than first-time users.

For this study, power bloggers were meant to be members of the public that were consistently reading and posting comments on a company’s corporate blog. Consistency was simply defined as continually posting at least one comment a week on the specific corporate blog. This number was chosen to allow for a wide array of possible participants, while still limiting the field to people who continually interact and keep up with the company’s blog at least once a week.

Although there could have been problems associated with the biased attitudes many researchers encounter when using volunteer participants (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), this study was specifically looking for the attitudes and perceptions of a niche group of people who already had knowledge of blogs and how they work. Participants without previous blogging experience would not be able to give useful insight into how or why they are using these corporate blogs.

## **Specific Cases**

The study focused originally on looking at three companies and their blogs: New Belgium Brewing: <http://www.newbelgium.com/blog>, Lightning Hybrids: <http://lightninghybrids.blogspot.com/>, and the National Outdoor Leadership School: [http://nols.blogs.com/nols\\_news/](http://nols.blogs.com/nols_news/). These three companies and their blogs were chosen because they were companies which the researcher had personal access to, knowing people that work at each company, and personally having worked for one of the companies. They also represented a diverse range in their products, goals, size, and consumer following. This variety was chosen to see the possible differences in motivations behind blogging in these different and unique companies.

New Belgium Brewery is a craft beer brewery located in Fort Collins, Colorado that employs over 300 people and has a dedicated and loyal following. New Belgium was started in 1991, and today is one of the nation's largest craft beer breweries. Lightning Hybrids is an automotive research and manufacturing company that has designed a hydraulic hybrid retrofit system and two 100 MPG hydraulic-biodiesel hybrid cars. Lightning Hybrids is located in Loveland, Colorado and has just over a dozen employees. Lastly, the National Outdoor Leadership School, or NOLS, is a company in the education field, headquartered out of Lander, Wyoming, but operating out of 14 locations world wide. They focus on experiential outdoor education and primarily teach outdoor skills, environmental ethics, and leadership curriculum. They manage thousands of employees and hundreds of thousands of students. Mid-study another company was added, Otterbox: <http://blog.otterbox.com/>, which is located here in Fort Collins and



creates protective cases for phones, tablets, and e-readers. They have hundreds of employees and offices around the world including Hong Kong, and Ireland. Why we added another participant mid-study will be discussed further in the Discussion chapter of this study.

### **Analysis & Interpretation**

A three stage process, similar to the one used in Hill's (2005) study was used to help analyze the data collected. This process was chosen because of the similarity of the two studies; Hill's method translated well to this study and provided a template for analysis. The first stage consisted of interviewing participants and the second step involved taking any and all relevant data from all the transcripts and re-arranging it into thematic categories based on the four research questions: anticipated benefits for the company, anticipated benefits for the consumer, realized benefits for the company, and realized benefits for the consumer. The final stage took the data in these four categories and formulated responses to the research questions in the form of a results section.

The collected data was open-coded, which means the researcher went through the transcripts and pulled out dialogue that had importance to the study. Importance was defined as any relevant information that lent insight into better understanding the study's goals. An example may be that a participant from one of the sample companies says that they wanted to start a blog because they thought it would drive more traffic to their website. This would be an anticipated benefit for the company and coded in the anticipated benefits for company section. Another example could be if a consumer said they got a lot of great feedback about products and services from other consumers, which

then lead to a purchase decision. This would fall under the category of realized benefits for the consumer.

The selected excerpts were placed in theme based categories, mentioned earlier, for later retrieval. The coding schemes were based primarily on the four main research questions, and used primarily to navigate through the data. As new themes emerged from the data there was always the flexibility to add more coding categories, to allow for the data to lead to unexpected findings. As Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state, “there is always the danger that the more that analysts are concerned with the structures of coding, the further they drift away from the lived realities of what they study” (p. 222). To keep coding simple, basic word processing software was used rather than the more involved qualitative research programs to put the interview narratives into a text format.

### **Reliability & Validity**

Reliability and validity are important concepts in any study because they determine how much confidence can be placed in the outcomes of the research (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). However both Mason (2002) and Hill (2005) state that qualitative research lacks the standardization commonly used in quantitative research and thus it is difficult if not impossible in applying measures of reliability. Instead, through in-depth interviews, the data collected in this study should be an accurate representation of the attitudes and experiences of those interviewed. By having transcripts of the interviews in their entirety and having access to the transcripts, accuracy of the raw data should not be a concern. McCracken (1988) said about the qualitative tradition that, “it is not intended

to capture issues of distribution and generalization. It tells us what people think and do, not how many of them think and do it” (p. 49).

Reliability has to do with the consistency of observations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) and is not so much of a consideration in qualitative research compared to quantitative research. As Anderson (1987) said, “if a measurement is composed of a single, non-repeated operation, there can be no measure of reliability” (p. 126). Interviews are usually a non-repeatable occurrence, because they take place in a particular setting at a particular time, and participants are asked a particular set of questions, all of which can never be recreated identically. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) also state that, “If the meanings of the social world are continually changing – and the investigator’s own understandings also change in relation to the scene under study – then replication of results via independent assessments is neither practical nor possible” (p. 239).

Validity deals with the truth of observations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). A single representation cannot serve as an accurate measurement; therefore the conventional idea of internal validity does not hold much relevance in most qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also argue that qualitative research does not intend to have external validity due to its specific nature and lack of generalizability to a larger population. Instead validity was addressed through triangulation and member validation to obtain credible findings that allowed for confidence in the interpretation of data by the readers. Triangulation involves the comparison of more than one form of data within a study. As Huberman and Miles (1998) stated, “By self-consciously setting out to collect and double-check findings, using multiple sources and modes of evidence, the researcher will

build the triangulation process into ongoing data collection” (p. 199). This study planned to interview multiple participants about the same issue, as well as using the findings from previous studies to reach the triangulation sought to create validity. Member validation refers to the process of taking findings back to the participants to be recognized as true or not (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As stated earlier, the researcher returned back to participants after the data was analyzed for debriefing as well as for follow up questions that emerged.

### **Limits & Protection of Subjects**

Qualitative research and the methods used in this study do have interpretational limits that do not support generalizing to the general population. Also purposive sampling is not representative of the general population since it is a non-random technique. This study was only interested in the part of the population that blogs and did not plan on generalizing to the larger general population and instead focused on understanding how some consumers use blogs and how companies take advantage of blogs as a marketing and communications tool. Voluntary sampling could have lead to a biased sample due the participant’s previous knowledge towards the subject matter.

In-depth interviewing also could have had a few potential problems due to the non-standardized questions that may lead to respondents answering slightly different versions of the questions compared to other participants depending on where the interview lead the researcher. Qualitative research may have also been subjected to interviewer bias which may have lead to the questioning of the validity of participants responses. However the benefits of depth and detail that were provided by qualitative

research methods hopefully outweighed any potential limits and validity flaws; this is discussed in more detail in the Discussion section of this thesis. Although not generalizable, the findings of this study may contribute to the body of knowledge regarding blogs and how some companies and consumers are interacting in the blogosphere.

## RESULTS

As stated earlier this study used a three stage process to obtain results, the first stage consisted of interviewing participants, the second stage involved open-coding relevant data from all the transcripts and re-arranging it into thematic categories based on the four research questions as well as other interesting themes that emerged throughout the interview process, for example: hurdles, prior blogging experience, time dedicated to blogging, post topics, and interesting thoughts. The final stage took the data in these categories and formulated responses to the research questions in the form of a results section. For a quick reference to this study's results please see Appendix F (page 73).

Validity was addressed through triangulation and member validation, obtaining credible findings that allow for confidence in the interpretation of the data. Triangulation was built into the study through double-checking transcripts for accuracy, post interview questioning of interviewees on confusing statements, interviewing multiple participants about the same issues, and comparing the results from this study with other similar studies. For example, Andersson et al. (2007) confirmed similar findings stated by one of this study's consumer participant's who acknowledged that they used company blogs in their decision making process during the purchase of a new product or service. Another similarity was found in Hill's (2005) findings where businesses were using blogs as a marketing and communications tool, and found a big part of a company blog's strength was in its ability to create dialogue with its readers but that the blog was not a good place to overtly sell or expect some sort of calculable ROI on the time and money invested into it. Lastly, member validation was achieved by sending transcripts back to the

interviewees for review in case they felt anything needed to be reworded or changed and allowed for follow-up on questions that emerged.

### **Company Results**

The participants were split demographically, with two female and two male interviewees. Their age groups were all between 28 and 50 years old and their titles included: VP of Marketing and PR, Social Networking Nerd, Social Media Specialist, and Social Media Coordinator. There were four companies interviewed and again were: New Belgium Brewery, Lightning Hybrids, The National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), and Otterbox.

**RQ1: What are the anticipated benefits of having a corporate blog by a company or business?** The company participants in this study had plenty to say about their blogging experience. The anticipated benefits of having a company blog ranged from communicating with potential consumers to creating buzz. There was some expectation that the blog would in turn create more customers, as well as help to promote other marketing events. Most companies interviewed agreed that they hoped the blog would help connect their company with the consumer, or possibly engage investors. Getting consumers to relate to the company or product on a deeper or less superficial level was another point made by some participants.

The blogs were all used to tell the companies' "story" and the hope was to make consumers feel like a part of the company and its culture. Some of the participants said they wanted to create fans of the company or products and have fun with the consumers,

and the phrase “putting a human face” on the company came up throughout the interviews. Most all of the participants wanted to drive more traffic to the company website and use the blog to keep lines of communication open with the consumer. Some companies were even tech-savvy enough to think of the blog in terms of search engine rankings and indexing, however not all mentioned this as a motivation to create a company blog. Lastly and most interestingly some participants had little to no expectations for the blog, not really understanding why they were participating in company blogging, however “gut feeling” told them it was important to have a blog.

**RQ3: What are the realized benefits for a company from having a corporate blog?** As for the realized benefits by the companies interviewed, it ranged from “none” to “the blog is a great ‘one-to-many’ way to update people.” Those who sought real customers or investors were disappointed in the blogs performance but were still happy that people were reading it and interacting with other followers. None of the companies interviewed really felt like they were seeing or could even calculate a return on investment (ROI) from the blog but believed the blog was doing a good job at putting a “human face” onto the company.

One company said they see a spike in readers pre-launch of a new product then a drop-off post-launch, which makes them believe they must not be giving the consumer the information they want to keep their attention. Another participant was happy with the traffic the blog was generating and how it was helping with search engine rankings. One company believed consumers read their blog because they are seen as the expert in their field, and another believed they get some of their clients from their blog. With only four



participants this study never aimed at generalizing these findings to all company blogs, but there are some interesting ideas and thoughts that were discovered about how these companies have used their blogs.

### **Other Company Findings**

There were also lots of hurdles these companies had to deal with. One participant stated that there were a lot of readers initially but as content waned readership fell off. Some participants had to deal with censorship of information because they did not want competitors knowing too much, while others had to deal with flaming or inappropriate language from their readers. A common theme was that it was difficult to get employees to commit to writing for the blog; one participant even said, “it is like pulling teeth to get a post.” A few participants had trouble even finding people who could write well enough to maintain a blog. One participant felt customers wanted to hear more from people higher up in the company, but those people rarely had time if ever to post on the blog.

Time spent designing and writing the blog was a concern throughout the companies interviewed, stating that there was never enough time to post as much as they wanted or about all the topics they wanted to post about; one stated, “Absolutely there is not enough time for it.” And another said, “I can see how it can be so much better, but it takes a lot of convincing and then a lot of commitment on others to follow through.” One participant stated the blog has become more of a burden to those running it than they think it is a benefit to the company. There was the common concern that the companies still were not giving the customers the information they wanted. Technologically speaking, one company was seeing consumers using the blog as a customer service

platform, which it was not designed for and has become a troublesome workaround.

Lastly, one company, Lightning Hybrids, had completely stopped blogging because the company did not think there was value to it.

The authors of the blogs ranged from having no blogging experience to years of experience with their own personal blogs, but as far as company blogging was concerned almost none of the participants had experience. One participant even confusingly said, “I had no prior experience with writing a blog, I guess I had a little blog experience, actually I was a long time contributor to another blog,” leading to the conclusion that some of the authors do not really know what to consider experience since until their current position were not really in charge of a company blog. Some companies had a single blogger while others had a team of writers, and one even allowed anyone who worked for the company to write for the blog if they wanted to. A few companies had writers just from their marketing department, while others had writers from many different departments. One company had one designated writer who collected stories from around the company and rewrote them for the blog. Some writers volunteered to be part of the blog, and some companies have the task written into employees’ job descriptions.

Most companies consistently got about two or three posts out a week, but all felt they could post more often, however the lack of time was always a restraint. One participant even said, “I hope to take it full time someday, but again how much are people going to read. Is there a blog out there that you check five times a week, every week, and read all the content?” Some companies posted whenever they wanted, and others had a strict posting schedule where they would get a post out on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

As for the topics of posts, most participants stated that anything was appropriate. Some topics dealt with updates on the company or products, but others were light, having to do with company culture or nothing really at all in particular that related to the company. One participant said, “Yes, some posts have done extremely well that I never expected. One on toast and another on Miracle Whip vs. Mayo.” Some authors wrote posts designed around specific keywords that dealt with the company or a certain product so search engines could find them easier. All companies interviewed decided their post topics internally; there was never a point where a participant said they had asked the consumers’ reading the blogs what they wanted to read about. Surprisingly, every participant said they allow consumer comments to post automatically on their blog even though sometimes they had to be taken down for inappropriate language or spam issues.

Most of the blogs were very unstructured, with little to no guiding principals for the authors. “No one has laid down any rules or anything; I think that stems from me writing the blog responsibly. I am here to tell our brand story” said one participant, or “we have recommendations and an editorial process, but no guidelines” said another. A peculiar similarity I discovered was that not a single company had a defined mission statement for their blog. One company does not even track the traffic on their blog, stating “I am not totally sure; I’m not the one tracking that info. It is tracked for the website as a whole. It is broken down per page but I try not to focus on it. It is high enough that they keep paying me.” As for ROI, most participants interviewed were not very concerned with it either, with one stating, “we might not know just what the blog costs fully and what the reward is. We don’t talk ROI and we don’t do in-depth analysis with the blog.” Another participant said, “we spend a little time on it, and hope its being

well received. In that respect it is worth it.” And yet another participant said, “Yes I think that it is a benefit... A small benefit.” As for thoughts of what the blog can be, one participant said:

I think it can be a great marketing tool from a search engine point of view. I think it is also great at keeping our past clients engaged and up-to-date with the company. But it can't be direct marketing on the blog. People can see right through a PR story and aren't interested.

Even though all the participants believed that company blogs were a good idea one stated, “The best way to get some stories into the eyes of readers is right to Facebook.”

Personally though, the blog authors enjoyed writing their company's blog. One stated, “the biggest benefit for me personally is that it engages me directly to all parts of the company. I deal with people way out of my pay grade. This access also gives me stories from all over the world.” And another, “yeah, I love it.”

## **Consumer Results**

The consumer participant was an avid blog follower in his late 20's. He lived in Lincoln, Nebraska and was a Marketing Consultant.

**RQ2: What are the anticipated benefits of using a corporate blog by a company's publics or consumers?** Even without the contribution of all the desired participants, there were still some interesting themes and ideas this study uncovered. From the consumer side, it was found that company blogs were used to try to keep up to

date on a company and its products, with the added anticipation of learning about new products and possibly receiving some sort of value for their time. The anticipation of getting some sort of value, whether that is through information or monetary incentive was enough to keep one consumer coming back to the company's blog.

**RQ4: What are the realized benefits for a company's publics or consumers from using a company's blog?** The realized benefits were that it allowed one consumer to have casual conversations with the company as well as other consumers. Also the idea that someone can learn about a company and decide if it is a company one would want to be doing business with was a big benefit for one participant. Our consumer participant used the company blog for adding information through posts, not solely for asking questions of the company or other readers.

### **Other Consumer Findings**

Other findings were that the company's blog should put forth more effort providing product information than just casual banter. Our consumer was an avid blogger who subscribed to over 275 RSS feeds and felt comfortable navigating a "website/blog no matter how it's set up." This participant had also been following this particular blog for over four years, retaining interest in the company and its products via their blog. The participant stated that the only reason they would stop following a company's blog was:

Because they don't update it for quite some time so if they keep updating and giving information than I'll stay somewhat connected at least. In the end the

quality and value of the product or service is what really drives the buying behavior, but having the blog there with information certainly keeps them top of mind for me.

## DISCUSSION

Part of what this study discovered was that people and companies were using blogs for many different reasons, and throughout the data produced it was easily seen that there were expected benefits to engaging in the blogosphere. These expectations were the reasons and motivations behind why people were using blogs and were hopefully being lead to having their needs or expectations met and gratified. The uses and gratifications theory again posits that people use media to fulfill a need, and as stated earlier in this paper, Schramm found that people weigh outcomes from their behavior against the effort they must apply (Baran & Davis, 2006).

All of our participants mentioned the time they spent either writing or reading blogs, and even though it took a lot of effort, they continued to participate in the activity, seemingly feeling that the effort expended was worth the reward. When studying blogs and the Internet, technologies where every individual can use the same medium to fill a different and specific need, uses and gratifications theory is still extremely useful in guiding both research and understanding the findings. Blogs have become one of those new paths whereby people can gratify a need, in this study's case, either to engage consumers and promote a company's culture and rhetoric or to stay connected as an avid follower of a company and their products or ideas. Uses and gratifications throughout time has helped researchers to understand why people use certain media, and this study is no exception, showing that blogs can be an effective way to seek & distribute information or create & maintain connections to others.

Companies and consumers alike were molding the medium to suit their individual needs, some creating dialogue and others disseminating information in times of crisis,

with each and every user using the medium for their own purposes. As stated earlier, uses and gratifications proposes two generally accepted reasons for using a medium. First, that people use a medium for its content, and second, that they use it simply for the experience of using the medium (Stafford et al.). In the case of this study, some users were motivated by specific information that they sought or sought to disseminate while others more simply by the communication process blogs enabled, both however finding either some or all of their needs met by participating in the activity.

Participants have also shown a connection to social cognitive theory; as they continued to participate in the blogosphere their expectations seemingly were constantly being reformed. Some authors were changing the content of their blogs to lead to better search engine rankings, some were adding more “soft” or “cultural postings,” and others were seeing that even though there was no hard evidence that their blog was a benefit to their company in the terms of ROI they still saw it as an important communication piece. Expectations were continually shifting and growing as their audiences did.

While this was happening participant’s capabilities to write meaningful and attention grabbing posts or comments were evolving too. Their self efficacy in navigating the confusing world of blogs was growing and in turn leading them to job enjoyment, even though almost none of this study’s company participants had blogging experience prior to their current positions. The study’s one consumer participant showed plenty of confidence in navigating the blogosphere as well, subscribing to over 275 feeds and saying, “Yes, I know my way around a website/blog no matter how it's set up.” The participants in this study have shown evidence that blogging, although not a science, is



meeting part of their media needs, and as those needs change the blogs evolve with them, making them more confident in using the technology to continue to communicate.

Throughout this study the researcher was surprised to see that most of the companies that participated had very little if any way of measuring the effects of their blogging efforts. None calculated ROI, and some did not even track page hits. There were no mission statements, yet there were positions in some companies dedicated to just writing the blog. Some companies felt Facebook was a much better avenue to get information to the consumer, but still maintained a blog. There were many “I believe” and “I think” statements with nearly no data or facts to back up those beliefs. Statements like, “well I think that if folks can see into the everyday parts of the company and see the culture they can relate to our product on a deeper level” or “I think a blog could work as an effective company communication piece.” The blasé attitude most of the companies interviewed had towards the structure of their blog was surprising, especially since most of the companies interviewed were spending time, money, and resources on maintaining their blogs. Lightning Hybrids, which ceased blogging said, “I think we thought the blog was a no-brainer to get people involved” however it apparently is not. One participant in answering the question of whether they believe their blog was working by adding to sales, responded, “there is a certain faith required.” So they do not have hard data, but they simply hope it is working.

Company blogging is still so new, and barely understood, yet companies are diving into the blogosphere with little to no plans of how to execute blogging effectively. Some companies were posting things they thought were important to the customers without even asking the question, what do the customers want? Yet from the people

interviewed, there was the strong belief that company blogs are important, and that if nothing else, are a good tool to add yet another “touch point” or line of communication to the consumers.

From the one consumer that participated in this study, it looks like some people may be reading these company blogs. Looking for product information, or some sort of monetary incentive is what kept one person coming back, over and over to a company’s blog. In the end, one participant summed up the results best, “it needs to be carefully positioned though so that the info provided is of value and interest. If it isn’t interesting to the reader there will be no readers.” Yet how do the companies know what is interesting to their readers without asking?

### **Limitations**

Although there were over 36 pages of transcripts filled with data the results of this study were fairly inconclusive due to limitations not anticipated in the design of the study. The major limitation encountered was a lack of participation from the consumer side of the study. The study aimed to interview six participants from the consumer side, called “power bloggers,” but was only able to get one participant to commit to an interview. The researcher’s belief is that this limitation may also be due to the disinterest of consumers to forfeit an hour of their time to a study where no compensation was offered. The topic of inquiry may also have limited possible participation solely by not having a large enough pool to pull from if consumers really do not read some of the company blogs that were chosen as cases.

For six months, requests for participation were posted multiple times on each company's blog, as well as each company's Facebook page. The researcher also posted requests on his personal blog and Facebook page to try to encourage participation from associates that may have read the specific blogs studied. The researcher even attempted to directly contact possible participants through posting comments on each company's blog posts. Lastly, the researcher dropped the "power blogger" requirement and was willing to interview anyone who had contact with one of the case company's blogs. Through all the requests two participants contacted the researcher about participating, one eventually found time to be interviewed, while the other never responded after the initial contact. After six months the study had to come to an end, unfortunately without as many participants as the research had hoped for.

As for the company side there were some limitations as well. One company that agreed to participate, Lightning Hybrids, had since ceased their company blog by the time the interview was scheduled, with company higher-ups not believing there was much purpose for the blog even though the blog author thought otherwise. However, the participant still agreed to be interviewed, and another company, Otterbox, was sought to fill the gap left. Otterbox is a local company that when contacted and asked to participate in this study were happy to fill the spot left open by Lightning Hybrids. The companies participated willingly and offered the researcher plenty of insight into the topic. Compensation in the form of the study's results were offered to the companies, so possibly that is where their motivation to participate came from.

Some of the other limitations encountered had to do with the method of study. In depth interviews over instant message had a few unexpected flaws. First, the researcher

thought instant messaging was synchronous communication, it actually was not. There were a lot of short little pauses between messages, where the interviewee was either thinking or typing, and the researcher would interject and re-ask or paraphrase the question, making things slightly confusing for both parties. There were times as well where the interviewee and interviewer were not on the same question at the same time and the conversation would be hopping around in a perplexing manner. The timing was odd too, some questions took a long time to answer and the researcher began to wonder if they really had the full attention of the interviewee, or if the interviewee was possibly distracted by something in their workplace. There was a moment where the Internet connection was slow too and hampered the dialogue, as well as an instance where the interviewee said they were comfortable with the technology but was obviously having difficulty logging onto the chat feature at the start of the interview. There were thoughts that some of the participants were possibly slow at typing or were even having a hard time putting eloquent words or thoughts into quick understandable messages. All of this lead to what the researcher believes were longer interviews with less actual data than doing face-to-face or telephone interviews. Lastly, there were no social cues, which made it easy for the interviewer and interviewee to get ahead or behind one another in the conversation. There was difficulty telling when a participant was done talking and ready to move on to the next question.

Although there was some interesting data and insight that came out of this study, the researcher believes the limitations hindered real success. More research on this topic needs to be done, and the scope of the project should be expanded greatly to get a better look at what is really going on in the blogosphere.

## **Implications**

Overall the findings of this study have lead the researcher to make one overarching suggestion; that for companies to be more successful at communicating with their constituents through their blogs companies need to focus on being more intentional in their efforts. Intention is a weighty word and the researcher hopes to pack a lot of meaning with this suggestion. Intention should be what leads both the companies and the bloggers themselves through the communication process. The data from this study showed that not much planning or thought was going into company blogging strategy yet companies were spending both time and resources in their effort to maintain a blog. It was completely surprising that such a laissez faire attitude towards blogging existed when every company that participated was a leader in their industry and most likely had detailed marketing plans with focused targeting and communications strategies, although that is an assumption. The findings of this study have prompted the researcher to outline a few key suggestions that hopefully will help companies take another look at the intent behind their blogs and moreover help to improve the stakeholder interest in their blogs and companies.

First off the researcher believes that companies need to start including their blogs in their overall marketing plan if they are not already. It seems most companies have some sort of detailed marketing plan with measurable goals and an over arching mission statement. Company blogs should be a part of or extension of that marketing plan and as so should be treated with the same intention that goes into other parts of that marketing plan like advertising or PR. The blog should be seen as a part of the larger plan to create,

communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large because in the end that is precisely what it is doing.

Companies also need to come up with a specific mission statement designed solely for their blogs. Just like a communications or marketing plan, the blogs need something guiding their creation and growth. Companies need to have a clearer understanding of why exactly they are participating in the blogosphere, what the specific reasons are for being there and what they hope to get out of all the effort they are expending on their blogs. Bloggers need to know what the specific purpose is of the blog so they can write for that purpose. Some companies may be interested in having a blog to communicate with customers and others to use it as a customer service platform. Still some companies may be using their blog to funnel information to one single place for customers to easily access and others are blogging to get better search engine rankings. There are many reasons why a company may have a blog but these reasons for having a blog are what should be guiding how the blog evolves to meet those needs. A specific mission for the blog as its own entity can let the writers know how to gear their efforts and that there are not unrealistic expectations from the blog. If companies have an intentional reason for the existence of their blog they should put that in writing so employees participating in the blogging effort know there is a focus they need to be paying attention too.

It may be worth the time for companies to also write down their goals and expectations for their blog. While in the process of molding the blogs mission statement is the perfect time to interject specific goals. Where the mission statement would tell the overarching purpose for the blog, the goals and expectations should be specific and

measurable. Specific expectations may make it easier for the bloggers to write for and design the blog because they will hopefully guide them in one direction instead of the blasé attitude this study found which was that anything really flies in regards to the blog. Specific goals also fix something to measure against, even if that measurement is simplistic in design, it would be a benefit to be able to say, 'yes the blog is meeting our goals or it is not'.

Measuring the benefits of a company blog may be difficult, but without any sort of measurements it is impossible to confidently say if the blog is worth paying someone to write and design. Although it is not always about bottom line with some companies, there is always a budget, and if the bloggers are passionate about what they are doing, it cannot hurt to have some sort of data to back up the claims that blogging is important to the company. Developing some sort of metrics for measurement of the blog's benefits to the company are then crucial. Companies need to be measuring if the efforts expended are worth the return. Simple measurements like analytics to even track the blog's traffic and to know where the audience is coming from, how long they are staying, and what they are really focusing on could be enough for some companies to continue their blogs into the future. Of course on top of technical data about demographics, companies should really attempt to set up ways to gauge if their blog is meeting any of the stated goals. As stated earlier, this may be difficult to do, but in the long run it may be worth the effort depending on the mission of the blog.

Companies also should be doing market research to find out what their consumers want to read about. The point of the blog is to get consumers to read it and hopefully retain their interest over time. It should then in theory be about what they want to read

about. It would behoove companies to spend a little time researching their readers, surveying them about their wants and needs and why they are there reading their company's blog in the first place. Knowledge about what the consumer wants is a powerful tool to be able to cater to those needs, and may possibly lead to reader retention. It may also give bloggers new ideas for posts, or shed light on the company and its products from the view of the consumers. Part of this research may even be to look what other companies in similar industries are doing, saying, and blogging about. It is always valuable to know what is going on around your company, this should be done regardless of a company's blogging strategy.

Hiring competent bloggers is another important part of a company's blogging strategy. Not everyone can write well and with clear intent, companies need to understand that either trained writers need to be brought on to write for the blog or be willing to train their employees how to write well. Asking someone from the marketing department to write the blog or looking for a raise of hands in a staff meeting for interested people is irresponsible if a company wants to utilize this tool successfully. Specific skills are needed to effectively write for an audience, and not everyone possesses those skills without a bit of training. Like any other position in a company, managers should want to hire people with the right skill sets to be able to productively accomplish the job they were hired to do. Being intentional with the decision of who writes for the blog is as important as picking every other hire within the company.

With everything that a company does to reach its potential, current, and past customers, blogs should be lead with intention and specific measurable goals. If it is worth doing it is worth doing right, so the nonchalant attitude that companies have about



diving into the blogosphere with little to no concern is a risky venture. As much harm can possibly be done by a poorly written and ill planned blog as good, so thought and intent need to be paramount when making the decision to participate in the exciting world of company blogging.

## CONCLUSION & SUMMARY

Whether or not people read company blogs, companies are publishing them. There is the belief that consumers want a more in-depth glance at the companies they do business with and because of that blogs may be here to stay. For blogs to be more useful to companies, the companies need to start being more intentional with their blogging efforts. Little to no research has been done on the benefits of company blogs, and even without the data companies still feel it is important to participate in the dialogue of the blogosphere.

More research on the topic needs to be conducted, possibly research on what consumers are actually expecting from company blogs. Also research on how companies are using their blogs compared to other social media, like Facebook and Twitter may be valuable. It may be useful to study all three together, to see how companies manage and juggle the different frontiers of each medium. With almost no research done in this specific area there is plenty of room and opportunity for follow-up studies into how companies and consumers use company related social media. It will be exciting to see what other researchers come up with regarding this topic.

No matter what we think about it, social media may be here to stay and one way or another it behooves companies and researchers alike to begin to try to understand how and why companies should be using these tools. What drives consumers to invest time and energy into a company's social marketing campaign will be crucial to understand how to best utilize these media. Without new research on these topics companies are operating in the dark, hoping this or that works, but still unsure as to the anticipated or realized benefits.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Guide – Company**

(As stated earlier, these are just guides intended to push the interviews into specific directions and not actual questions in any order)

#### **Part 1 – Introduction of myself and the study**

Introduce myself and the study again, as well as the aims of the project, recording issues, anonymity, and what to do if they need to take a break

#### **Part 2 – Introduction of the participant**

What is your name?

What is your title at the company?

What is the company's name?

What does the company do?

How many people are employed at your company?

#### **Part 3 – Why blog – Motivations**

Who decided and when that your company should have a blog?

When did you actually start putting together your blog?

What are the goals of your blog? Expectations? Reasons? Purpose of the blog?

Mission statement?

Who blogs?

How are topics decided upon?

Do you take the readers into account when you decide topics?

Why do you think your topics are important to readers?

Is there an aspect of the blog you think is for consumers, and another for internal personal?

Do you feel you are giving the readers what they want?

Are there guidelines for posts?

How has your blog evolved from day one until now?

Did the author/s have prior experience with blogs?

How did you get the job of blog author?

Are the posts censored? By who? For what?

What is the format? Post anything?

What department would the blog be considered part of?

Do you allow consumer feedback?

Does that post automatically or do you censor it?

How do you deal with consumer feedback specifically through the blog,  
compared to emails?

How much time and resources are dedicated to the blog every week?

How often do you post? Why? Feel you should post more or less? Why?

What kind of information do you provide to the consumers through the blog?

Why is that information relevant, why would a consumer want that information?

#### **Part 4 – What benefits does your company see from your blog**

Again, what are the expected benefits of the blog?

Do you feel those benefits are being seen?

What benefits are you seeing if any? Any unexpected benefits?

Any negatives turn up? Expected? Unexpected?

How do you deal with feedback, negative and positive?

How do you measure the benefits of the blog?

Is there a ROI that is important?

What's the biggest benefit to blogging, personally and to the company?

Biggest negative, personally and to the company?

Is the blogging model sustainable for your company?

Do you know your traffic? Does that relate to business?

Is the blog worth the effort?

### **Part 5 – Conclusion and thanks**

Thanks for participating, there may be follow up questions, may need clarifying on issues that are confusing, access to final paper and findings.

Would you be willing to post on your blog, an ask for consumer participation in my study? I am looking for two participants and have blog post I can send you, which you can modify if needed to fit your style and language of the blog.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview Guide – Consumer**

(As stated earlier, these are just guides intended to push the interviews into specific directions and not actual questions in any order)

#### **Part 1 – Introduction of myself and the study**

Introduce myself and the study again, as well as the aims of the project, recording issues, anonymity, and what to do if they need to take a break

#### **Part 2 – Introduction of the participant**

What is your name?

What do you do?

#### **Part 3 – Why blog – Motivations**

Why do you follow this company's blog?

How often do you check the blog?

How often do you post on the blog?

What motivates you to post on the blog?

Why did you begin to follow the blog?

How long have you been following the blog?

What about the company interests you?

What are the benefits you hope to realize from participating in this blog?

What kind of information are you seeking from this blog?

Is it just this blog you read or are there others?

Is it about the experience of being part of the blog or the actual information on the blog that interests you?

How proficient do you feel at blogging? (surfing, posting, linking...)

Is there a preference for you whether a blog is authored by one person or multiple?

#### **Part 4 – What benefits does see from participating in this blog**

What are the actual benefits you get from participating in this blog?

What would you want to see done differently by the company with their blog?

Do you get all the information you seek?

Do you think the company does a decent job with the information they provide?

What information would you like to see?

Does the blog help promote goodwill toward the company from you?

Does the blog encourage you to learn more about the company and its products?

Have you learned more about blogging from participating in this blog?

#### **Part 5 – Conclusion and thanks**

Thanks for participating, there may be follow up questions, may need clarifying on issues that are confusing, access to final paper and findings.

## APPENDIX C

### Company Invitation – Email

Date

Dear Participant,

Hello, my name is Paul Ronto and I am a graduate-student researcher from Colorado State University in the Journalism and Technical Communications Department. We are conducting a research study on how businesses are using web blogs to communicate with their public by looking at the motivations behind the activity. We also plan to look at the consumer's perspective of company blogs by interviewing members of the public that continually follows a company's blog. The title of our project is "*What is going on in The Blogosphere: A Study of How Consumers and Companies Use Weblogs in the Marketing and Communication Process.*" The Principal Investigator is Jamie Switzer, Ph.D., Associate Professor in the Journalism and Technical Communications Department, and I am the Co-Principal Investigator.

Little academic research has been done on company blogging and its benefits to both businesses as well as to the consumer, and it would be interesting to hear your perspective on the topic. We are inviting you to participate in a one-on-one interview because we feel you would be able to provide valuable insights into the area of company blogging. The interview would take place this Spring at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will take place over an Internet Chat program such as AIM or Facebook chat, and will last approximately one hour. I may wish to follow-up with you to clarify any of your comments with a brief follow-up interview or email. Your participation in

this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty.

I am also asking your permission for me to post a recruitment posting on your company blog to help recruit possible consumer participants from your readers.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private, and only the researcher(s) involved in this study will have complete access to that data. While there are no direct benefits to you, we hope to gain more knowledge on how blogs are being used as a marketing tool to understand if the medium can be an effective communications device. Of course at the end of this study you will receive a copy of the final paper with the study's findings included.

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

I thank you for your time, and if you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions please contact me at: [Paulronto@gmail.com](mailto:Paulronto@gmail.com) or call at (970) 690-4448; or Dr. Jamie S. Switzer, Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication at Colorado State University: [jamie.switzer@colostate.edu](mailto:jamie.switzer@colostate.edu) or call at (970) 491-2239. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655.



Regards,

Paul Ronto

## **APPENDIX D**

### Consumer Invitation – Blog Post

Invitation to participate in a study on Blogging

Hello, my name is Paul Ronto and I am Graduate student at Colorado State University studying company weblogs. More specifically I am hoping to investigate how businesses are using weblogs to communicate with you, their public!

In order to do this, I am interviewing a number of businesses that currently have an active blog, I also need to interview a few of the blogs active participants, and was hoping you would be willing to take part in this project.

So if you read this blog frequently and post comments on this blog at least once a week I would love to interview you. I feel you would be able to provide valuable insights into the area of company blogging. I plan on carrying out interviews over chat or instant message sometime this spring and hope you would be available for an interview lasting between 45 minutes to an hour in length.

Little academic research has been done on company blogging and its benefits to both businesses as well as to the consumer and it will be interesting to see your perspective on the topic. You will have full access to my final paper and findings, as well as the usual confidentiality these types of projects ensure.

I thank you for your time, and if you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions please contact me at: [Paulronto@gmail.com](mailto:Paulronto@gmail.com) or call at (970) 690-4448; or Dr. Jamie S. Switzer, Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication at Colorado State University: [jamie.switzer@colostate.edu](mailto:jamie.switzer@colostate.edu) or call at (970) 491-2239. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655.

Regards,

Paul Ronto

## APPENDIX E

### Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Hi, this is Paul Ronto again, first I wanted to thank you once more for deciding to participate in my study on company blogs, your insights and opinions on the topic are valuable to me and this study. As of now we have an interview time set up for **(Case Specific)**. The interview will take about 1 hour, and our conversation will be recorded. The recorded conversation will be available to me only, the sole researcher. I want you to understand that your identity will be completely confidential during this whole project and that anything you say can in no way be connected back to you by anyone other than myself. With that said, the remainder of this e-mail is simply designed to prepare you for our interview.

To better prepare yourself for our interview and the topics and questions we will be discussing, I would like you to read over the following questions and spend some time thinking about them before we meet. During the interview we will also discuss other subjects, but these general questions should get your thoughts organized as to where the interview will take us. Also, please do not be afraid to say what you think and feel as the interview proceeds, I consider all your thoughts and opinions valuable.

General topics for discussion:

Company

1. What are your company's motivations/goals behind having a blog?
2. What type of information do you feel is important to post on your blog?

3. Who decides what information goes onto the blog?
4. What do you think motivates consumers to visit your blog?
5. What do you think the benefits to your company are from having a blog?

#### Consumer

1. Why do you read this company's blog?
2. What type of information do you want to see on a company's blog?
3. What would you change about this blog?
4. What do you think this company's motivations are behind having a blog?
5. Why do you keep returning to this blog?

I look forward to chatting with you and again would like to thank you for your participation in this study. If you have any questions or concerns about our upcoming interview, please feel free to contact me at: [Paulronto@gmail.com](mailto:Paulronto@gmail.com) or call at (970) 690-4448; or Dr. Jamie S. Switzer, Associate Professor in the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication at Colorado State University: [jamie.switzer@colostate.edu](mailto:jamie.switzer@colostate.edu) or call at (970) 491-2239. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655.

Regards,

Paul Ronto

## APPENDIX F

### Research Question Results

#### **RQ1: What are the anticipated benefits of having a corporate blog by a company or business?**

- Communicate with potential customers and generate a buzz
- Further our marketing and events
- Create a solid following that would turn into our first customer base
- CFO expected to get most of our first customers
- Connect with customers through the blog
- Engage investors through the blog
- To communicate with our consumers
- Get customers to relate to our product on a deeper level
- Breed less superficial communication with the consumer
- Make consumers feel a part of our company
- Reaching out to our consumers
- Help us tell our brand story
- Allow folks to learn more about our products and our culture
- Interaction and exposure
- Interact with people
- Show customers real, authentic windows into our culture
- Give them insights into our products
- Have fun with customers

- Create fans who hopefully buy the product
- Share our culture
- Produce content of interest to consumers
- Put a human face to our company
- Cause people to return to our website again and again
- Keep communications and the company top of mind for consumers
- To engage and inform the company's community with stories form all over
- To get more indexed pages on Google so that we show up when searched
- To market the company in an informal story-like way
- Give updated information to constituents when needed
- I hope it leads to more sales

**RQ2: What are the anticipated benefits of using a corporate blog by a company's publics or consumers?**

- To keep up to date on product information
- Hopefully learn about a few products earlier than others
- Maybe even get coupons or deals to purchase new cases
- The want for information,
- The want to be in the "know"
- I was hoping to get some value for my time, something that would make reading it worth my time

**RQ3: What are the realized benefits for a company from having a corporate blog?**

- None
- We haven't seen any customers or investors come from blogging
- Our real customers were not influenced by blogs so between that and not having any milestones to report we decided to shelve it
- Yeah, people are reading it and I think we are getting what we want
- You should always want more readers and more interaction but right now things are moving along well
- The ROI would be tough to calculate but I think it is worth it
- As far as I know we have no way to measure blog v. sales
- As far as putting a human face to our company, yes, I would say we are successful
- To create content that causes people to return, I would say no, we are not there yet
- Customers look to our blog when they are looking for a specific product
- We see a spike when an anticipated launch is about to happen
- Blog contributes to our search rankings
- Good traffic generator and assists with search rankings pre-launch
- The blog is a great "one-to-many" way to update people and funnel everyone to one story/place
- Past clients want to stay connected and see updates
- Other clients want to see that they have invested in something worthwhile
- People recognize the company as an authority in the subject



- People read it because they believe we have the expert advice and want updates and relevant interesting general stories
- We believe that we do get some clients from the blog, but not solely because of it
- You need time and multiple touch points before you are ready to commit. The blog is one of the many touch points
- The blog benefits the company during times of emergency, it allows us to point everyone to one place for updated info
- It saves time and keeps our story to one official story
- Clients staying involved

**RQ4: What are the realized benefits for a company's publics or consumers from using a company's blog?**

- This is a great way to have a casual conversation with the company as well as other users of the products or services
- Talking with the other consumers is a big part as well for me
- It is nice to hear from other people who use the same stuff
- I think on this company's blog I don't get as much value as I may on others
- The one thing I do not seem to get from them is a better price point
- It always seems that prices are cheaper on more of warehouse sites than direct from them

- But their customer service and quality are very high which is why I keep coming back
- For me I like to find and learn online, on my own time and this blog is a great way to do that
- Learning about the company behind the products or services. You can start to get a feel for if this is a company you would want to be doing business with or not. It adds to their credibility and reputation